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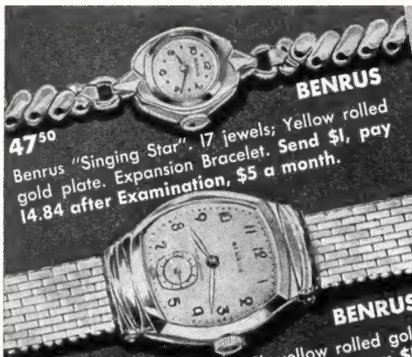

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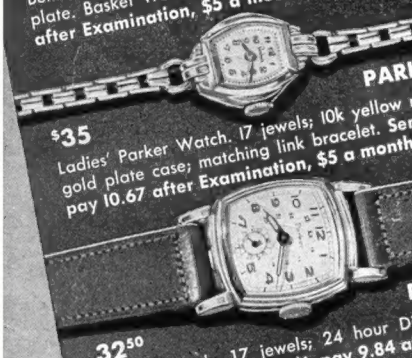

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A Thrilling Novelette of

Bad Trouble at

By
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His gun lashed out with a tongue of flame and a roar that sounded over the noise of the wagon.

Traitor Station

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Only traitor's blood could quench the blazing inferno kindled in the Pacific Northwest by the roaring of Fort Sumter's guns, when Lance Corrigan, frontier undercover agent, signed on to do that hopeless chore. He faced alone the ruthless, power-mad politicos who sought to build an outlaw republic from a desperately wounded nation.

CHAPTER ONE

Lonely Mission

THE month was May, the year 1861, and the news of the firing on Fort Sumter had swept across the continent. A bloody decision would be reached east of the Rocky Mountains, but the influence of events on the Pacific coast might be great enough to swing that decision one way or the other. It was the recognition of this fact which brought Lance Corrigan back to Oregon from San Francisco. He made a fast ride through the Siskiyous and along the Rogue and on north to Roseburg. There he made an overnight stop, listened to the talk which was passionately Union or passionately Confederate, and came on the next day to the Black Horse Stage Station.

The Black Horse was a group of sprawling log buildings surrounded by a stockade eight feet high, and centering a huge clearing into which the road came from the timber, snaked across the meadow, and disappeared again into the timber on the steep hill to the north. Lance rode warily now, for spies were everywhere, and enemies often posed as friends.

Lance saw the hay hands cutting timothy west of the station, the musical sound of a scythe being whetted riding the spring air to him. The thud of maul on splitting wedge came from the ridge east of the clearing where men were splitting rails.

There was the smell of growing things in

Lance's nostrils, for the sun lay hot upon the land, and spring is a fine and beautiful season in western Oregon. He caught the fragrance of the freshly cut timothy, he saw the slow lift of smoke from the station's fireplace chimney, he felt the peace of this scene as it came to him, and in a way it was a homecoming. He had never been here before; he had never met Zola Drager who ran the station, yet there was a familiarity about this, and he felt already that he knew this girl he had never met.

The heavy front gate was open. Lance rode into the stockade and dismounted. He saw no one about, but there was a leggy sorrel standing in front of the log house, and he heard the run of talk through the open door. Lance could not make out the words until he was close, and when he did, he came to an abrupt stop, for a man was saying, "The first shot for our liberty was fired last month at Fort Sumter. If we don't fight now for ourselves, we never will."

"It isn't time yet," a woman said stubbornly. "I say we've got to wait, Jasper."

"Wait, wait, wait. That's all you've said since Lincoln was voted into the White House."

The woman laughed softly. "And I was right. You were all for raising the Pacific Republic flag as soon as we heard Lincoln was elected. You said war would break out any minute." She laughed again. "That minute lasted about four months."

"But this is different. War has started. The Confederates will be in Washington inside of a month. Lincoln's government will have to make peace, and then where will we be? Exactly where we are now, ruled by politicians living three thousand miles away from us who don't know as much about this part of the country as we know about China."

"If peace comes that quickly, Jasper, we wouldn't last. If we ever win, it will be after a long war when the Union is so exhausted it can't fight even our paltry forces."

"There's one thing I have been too slow about," the man said in a swift rush of words. "You've been putting me off, too, but I'm not going to listen to this wait, wait, wait, any longer."

Lance had stood motionless, uncertain what he should do, fearing that this woman he was hearing was Zola Drager, and still not believing that it could be. Then he heard the sounds of scuffling, heard the woman cry out, and he went across the porch and on into the living room in three long strides. The man was holding the woman hard against him, and he was saying, "I love you, Zola. I can't stand being put off like this. You name the date, and—."

Lance had reached the man then. He said, "There's a way to treat a lady, mister, and that ain't it."

The man swung around, pushing the woman away from him, and before he had completed the turn, Lance swung a wicked right fist that caught him on his wide jaw and slammed him against the far wall. He grunted when he hit the wall, the jar knocking a picture loose and bringing it to the floor in a glass-tinkling crash. He remained motionless for a moment, meaty shoulders still against the wall, green eyes narrowing, and then a hand dropped to his gun.

"I wouldn't do that," Lance said quickly, his own gun swinging up and covering the big man.

"I want no trouble here," the woman said quietly. "I'll see you tomorrow, Jasper."

The green eyes came to Lance now, sweeping the length of his lank body. The man asked, "Who are you?"

"Lance Corrigan."

"What do you want here?"

"My business."

"I'll make it mine if you're here when I come back," the man said. He nodded at the woman. "I'll see you tomorrow, Zola." He strode past her and out of the room. A moment later Lance saw him go through the stockade gate at a gallop.

"All right," the woman said imperiously. "Who are you? Lance Corrigan means nothing to me."

LANCE had his first good look at her then. She was hardly more than a girl, and she was small, the top of her head coming below his shoulders, and her hair was as red as the western sky when the sun stands atop the Coast Mountains. Her eyes were a dark blue, and there was a fire in them now. He couldn't tell, as his gray eyes locked with hers, whether it was an anger that came from her meeting with the

man she'd called Jasper, or whether it rode from his own hasty action.

"You're Zola Drager, I'd guess," Lance said slowly, "and I'll admit I'm disappointed. You're pretty enough, and as short-sighted as the rest of the fools who talk about the Pacific Republic."

"So I'm a fool." Zola's lips made a long, severe line. "Anything else you have to say?"

"No, except that I'll appreciate your help. You can start in by giving me a job."

"A job? Why, you're a bigger fool than you just said I am. I wouldn't have you around the place."

"Starr King will be disappointed when he hears that," Lance murmured. "He said you were as smart as you were pretty. And as loyal. When he hears what I heard you and that Jasper—"

"Starr King sent you?" The girl put out a hand to the table to steady her. "I—why, I—. All right," she said defiantly. "I'll give you a job." She slapped him across the face then, a resounding crack that ran the length of the big room. "I'll give you a job trying to undo the damage you just did."

"Damage? I didn't do anything but—."

"Nothing but destroy something that I've been a year building."

"Oh, you mean this Jasper. Sorry. The way you were fighting him off, I didn't have the idea you wanted him."

She said angrily, "He's told me some things about the Pacific Republic that I want to know. You don't gain the confidence of a man like that overnight."

Lance saw it then, and he knew what the girl must think of him. "I guess I'm a little on the hair-trigger side. I should have known better from what Starr told me about you."

"Jasper Murtree is the Douglas county leader of the Pacific Republic bunch. He has a store in Roseburg and a farm on the Umpqua. He has money and influence and people like him. That's why he's more dangerous in Oregon than a dozen Jeff Davises." She paused, her eyes blue pin-points of fury. Then she added, "You don't need to worry about him taking advantage of me. I never saw a man I couldn't handle."

"I'm sorry," Lance said.

Anger left the girl as swiftly as it had come. "You're hungry, aren't you? I'll get something." She left the room, and a moment later called him into the dining room. She had placed a plate of food at the end of one of the long tables, and motioned for him to sit down. "You've known Starr a long time?"

"Not very long," Lance answered. "I heard him speak at the big Union mass meeting last February in San Francisco. I had a talk with him afterwards. He believes the secesh crowd is organized in both Oregon and California, and if they can get their hands on the guns they need, we'll have a rebellion all the way from the Columbia to the Mexican border."

"And so you took on the job of giving me a hand?"

"No. You've done a fine job of collecting information, and getting it on to Starr. My business is a special assignment. It will come tonight, or tomorrow night, or a week from now. It's hard to tell, but what your friend Jasper does will be determined by what I do."

"What is that assignment, Mr. Corrigan?"

He looked at her sharply then, feeling the suspicion that was in her, and knowing that he could not trust her fully until she trusted him. He said, "Perhaps it would be better if you didn't know."

She nodded. "Perhaps. What sort of a job do you want?"

"I want to spend my time in the timber north of here close to the road. I thought you might need some wood cut."

"That will work out," she said. "Your meals?"

"I'll take my suppers here because I want to see the stage crowd and listen to the talk. I'll sleep at my woodpile."

"Have you ever been in Oregon before?"

Lance smiled. "I'm about as much of an Oregonian as a man could be. I crossed the plains with my folks in '43, and I've lived in Oregon City until a year ago when I went to San Francisco."

"Do you expect any other help beyond what I can give you?"

"Yes. Clark Zachary will be coming south from Portland any day. You know him?"

"No, I don't." Zola got up from where she had been sitting at the table. "I'll be back in a minute. The stages get in about the same time, and we usually have a big

crowd to feed. I've got to get the girls started on supper."

LANCE had finished his meal, and was tamping tobacco into his pipe when Zola returned. She laid half a gold eagle on the table beside him, and stepped back, her eyes on him closely. Lance smiled, and drew the opposite half of the same coin from his pocket. The jagged pieces fitted perfectly together. He looked up at her, and motioned to the gold eagle. "Satisfied?"

"Yes." Zola picked up her part of the coin. "I was in San Francisco more than a year ago, and I saw Starr King cut two of these coins to the same pattern. He gave me this piece. He said then that war was coming, and it would take thought and the willingness to sacrifice our lives if we were to keep the Pacific states in the Union."

"He's a brilliant man. He saw this coming when other people were talking compromise." Lance tapped his half of the gold coin on the table. "I have never seen Clark Zachary, but he has half of the other coin you saw Starr cut. His part is the same as yours. He will probably ask you to identify me to him."

Zola nodded. Then she said bitterly. "My father was murdered a year ago because he was the backbone of the Unionists' thinking in this part of the country. I believe it was Jasper Murtree who killed him. Before I'm done, I'll know."

Lance rose, and faced her, his long-fingered hands gripping her shoulders. He said softly, "Before we're done, Zola, we'll know."

CHAPTER TWO

"Don't Trust Clark Zachary"

LANCE CORRIGAN sat on the porch of the log house, patiently nursing his pipe, his hat pulled low over his forehead to shade his face from the sun that had dropped now almost to the fir-tipped slopes of the Coast Mountains. He thought of Thomas Starr King, the California minister whose great voice was like a clarion call for the Union, a voice that only death would still.

"The Black Horse Stage Station will be a strategic spot for you to stay," King had told Lance. "Almost all the people in Oregon live between the Coast Mountains and the Cascades. You will have counties north of you such as Benton, Lane, Linn, and Polk which gave more votes to Breckenridge than to Lincoln. South of you there will be Douglas, Jackson, and Josephine which did the same."

"I can't believe the forces of secession are that strong," Lance had said soberly, shaking his head.

"You will before you are there very long," King had returned. "From the information Zola Drager sends me, those forces are stronger than any of us thought. You only have to look at the election returns last November to have proof that what Zola says is true. The voting was different in Oregon than in any other northern state. Lincoln polled 5,344 votes, and Breckenridge 5,074, a plurality for Lincoln of only 270. Douglas had 4,131 votes, Bell, 212, but I'm not sure those people will count for much. The issues between Lincoln and Breckenridge were clear, and don't forget that Joe Lane ran with Breckenridge."

"I know."

"Joe Lane isn't Senator now, Lance, but a lot of Oregon folks still believe in him. His home is no great distance from the Black Horse Stage Station." King had shaken hands with Lance then, and his last words had been, "Trust Zola Drager fully. It is given to some to wear blue and fight in the lines of battle. Others of us will fight far away from the sound of cannon fire, but never forget that the battles may be determined by what we do." He had smiled then. "Zola has half of one of my gold coins. So does Clark Zachary. They are your means of identification, given by one lover of the Union to another. Trust no one, unless he has one of these."

Now, thinking back over the last hours, Lance Corrigan knew he had come into this thing all wrong. He should have established beyond any doubt that he was who he said he was, should have gained Zola's complete confidence. Instead, he'd blundered in like an overgrown kid tackling a job too big for him. By punching Jasper Murtree on the jaw, he'd placed Zola in a difficult position. It would be hard for her to explain to Murtree why she had given Lance a job. Yet he had to remain, at least until Clark Zachary came.

LANCE was still on the porch when the south bound stage came out of the timber. With the first sight of it, hostlers ran from the barn to the front of the station, and Zola and her kitchen help came to stand beside them, for the arrival of the two thoroughbraces was the great event of the day. Lance remained on the porch, pulling quietly on his pipe and wanting only to stay in the background.

The six horses came at a hard run through the meadow, harness gleaming, silver buckles on fire from the evening sun. The stage reached the wide place in the road in front of the stage station, the driver threw on the brake, pulled on the lines, and the fast-moving thoroughbrace came to a sudden stop before the stockade gate.

The driver threw the lines to the hostlers, and came down. He called, "Howdy, Zola. Did I beat the north bound in?"

"By a hair," Zola answered. "You're just wanting to brag. If you had any eyes, you could see it coming now."

Five minutes later the same scene was re-enacted, and when the passengers were assembled in the sitting room, Lance had his opportunity to study them. They were a motley crowd: politicians, gold-seekers going south, business men, farmers, a professional gambler, and others Lance could not immediately identify.

Zola called supper, and the passengers crowded into the dining room. Zola seated the drivers at the heads of the long tables, the passengers and shotgun messenger of each stage at the table where their driver sat, and Lance with the farm employees at a third table. There was little talk at Lance's table, the men eating with undivided attention, their capacities enormous and unbelievable, but there was a great deal of conversation from the other tables, and Lance was thankful for the silence at his own.

Of the twenty odd passengers in the room, Lance was particularly interested in two, both having come on the south bound stage. One was a young man, little older than Lance, tall and dark, and there was an air of quiet competence about him that told Lance he was a man who could take care of himself. From the bits of talk that came to Lance from the other table, he gathered that the man was a lawyer from Portland, and was bound for Jacksonville.

The second man who attracted Lance's attention was in his middle forties, fat, short, and loud of mouth. He was the sort who would be in the front row at any gathering, and within five minutes from the time the passengers were seated, the conversation was centering around him.

"The North thinks it can coerce the South," the fat man said in his shrill voice, "but there never was a greater mistake made. Compromise perhaps, but not coercion. I know the South. I know what her noble sons are like. I came from Kentucky myself, and I can prophesy the events of the next months if that rail-splitter Lincoln pursues his present policies."

"Perhaps you would like to make that prophecy public," the slim lawyer suggested.

"I am not afraid to, sir. I certainly am not. There will be a few battles. Not many, because the arms of thhe South will triumph from Texas to Virginia. The Confederacy will defend its honor, and the Union will be broken. There will be two republics, nay, I should say three, in this land we have been pleased to call the United States."

"Three, Major Ransom?" a business man asked. "How do you get three?"

Ransom! Lance knew now. Abel Ransom was a name familiar to most Oregonians. He was a politician who by one means or another had been able to hold a lucrative government post of some kind from the moment he had come north from California. He was known as Major because he had helped fight the Rogues during the Indian trouble in Southern Oregon, but Lance, watching him now as he talked, wondered cynically how close he had actually come to the sound of gunfire.

"I say three because geography and the nature of the people who inhabit this beautiful country along the Pacific will decree that there shall be a third republic west of the Rockies," Ransom went on. "Here is a land of more than one million square miles with unknown but tremendous resources: minerals, timber, fish, farm land. Everything that a great nation needs. We have only an insignificant number of inhabitants. We must expand. We must build. Is it logical, sir, that we should be ruled from Washington? Or Richmond? I say no, and from what I have heard these last

months, I would say that the people of Oregon and California agree with me."

"Perhaps you know the complete plans for the Pacific Republic?" the slim lawyer asked.

"No, I do not. I know that such plans have been made, and the men who have made those plans are the political leaders of the far West. I know that the administrations of Oregon and California are opposed to coercion. Under these circumstances I can see nothing ahead but the course I have outlined. I am on my way south to start a newspaper in Jacksonville. When I have in my possession the plans for the Pacific Republic, I will publish them. I will not surrender, sir. I will not equivocate. I will not retreat. Pass the venison, Mr. Zachary."

ZACHARY! Clark Zachary! This was the man Thomas Starr King had said would meet Lance at the Black Horse Stage Station. Lance had hardly expected him so soon, although he knew King had sent the letter to Zachary some time before his own departure from San Francisco.

Zachary was smiling as he passed the platter of venison to Ransom. He said, "I can tell you some of those plans. Texas will belong to this so-called Pacific Republic. Chihuahua and Sonora are to be wrested from Mexico. Do I understand you to condone such actions?"

Ransom helped himself to the biggest piece of venison, and passed the platter on. "Mr. Zachary, I do. I do not believe in coercing the South. I do believe that our destiny lies in our own hands, and unless we take steps to govern ourselves, we shall continue to be misruled. Owners of industry will keep their factories on the Atlantic coast. We will continue to be the ragglé-taggle end of the country which they have dedicated to Indians, buffaloes, and fur-seekers. Mr. Zachary, I think this division will be made with little disruption." He sliced the venison, and stabbing a piece with his fork, waved it at the lawyer. "Perhaps you know of Albert Sydney Johnson who commands the department of the Pacific. There is no question where his sympathies lie. With him in command—."

Zachary was on his feet, black eyes narrowed and suddenly hard. "You are talking treason," he said coldly. "The day may come when you will hang for treason the same as any traitor. Until that day comes, I shall not permit such talk to pass in the public dining room of a stage station."

Ransom, too, was on his feet, his voice trembling with anger. "I am not a traitor. If there is hanging to be done, it had better be those who oppose progress. Now, Mr. Zachary, if you care to step outside—."

"There will be no trouble here," Zola said sharply. She had taken a rifle down from the wall, the muzzle pointing at Abel Ransom. "Sit down, both of you, and finish your supper, or start walking up the big road."

"I hope you will pardon us," Zachary said apologetically, "but I have heard this same kind of treasonable talk in Portland, Oregon City, and Salem. I will listen to it no longer." He made a small gesture of apology. "I realize this is not the place to make a disturbance. I'm sorry."

"I ain't so sure," a man at the table growled. "Any place is a good place to stop a traitor's talk."

Ransom stood there a moment, his fat cheeks red with ill-suppressed fury. "It's funny," he growled, "anybody calling me a traitor." He sat down, and reached for the headcheese.

A tension lay upon the big dining room. There was no talk and no gaiety, and when the meal was over, the passengers filed back into the sitting room, still under a stiff restraint. When the stages wheeled away, Ransom continued in the south bound, but Zachary stayed. He said to Zola, "I've had stomach trouble, ma'am, and the unpleasantness tonight made it worse. I'd like to have a room. I may stay over for several days."

"Certainly," Zola said, and motioned for him to follow her.

Lance went back to his chair on the porch, filled his pipe, and thought about what had happened. It was not probable, the way he saw it, that a man like Abel Ransom would be high in the counsels of the Pacific Republic crowd. His talk was too loud, too blatant. Yet Lance could not be sure. A newspaper at Jacksonville could be a powerful force against the Union. In any case, Abel Ransom had gone on. It had left only Jasper Murtree to fight if that kind of a showdown came, and Clark Zachary was here to give him a hand.

Zola came to the porch and stood beside

Lance. She asked softly, "What did you think of the disturbance during supper?"

Lance stood up. It was dusk now. He looked at her, tried to read her eyes, and could not. He said, "I think Ransom is a braggart who will do neither side much good."

"Zachary?"

"If he's Clark Zachary, he's the man Starr King told to come here to help me. I'll have a talk with him in the morning. I'd see him tonight, but Starr instructed him to find me."

"What are your plans for tonight?"

"I'd like for you to fix me a roll of quilts. I'll sleep near the road at the edge of the timber."

"There are quilts in the barn, but first I want you to meet Hank Talbot. Come along."

LANCE followed Zola around the log house and on to the stage barn. A bearded man was standing in the doorway, his eyes absently on the now dark Coast Mountains. When he saw who was coming, he took his pipe out of his mouth, and turned to spit. He said, "Howdy, Zola."

"Hank, this is Lance Corrigan," Zola said. "You'll remember he ate at your table tonight."

"Yeah, I remember." Talbot offered a gnarled hand. "Wasn't a real pleasant meal, was it? The sooner that danged Ransom is hung the better off we'll all be."

"Starr King sent Mr. Corrigan here to do a special job, Hank. He wants some quilts. He thinks he'd rather sleep under the firs than in one of our good beds."

"Wal, if Starr King sent him, I reckon he's all right." Talbot went into the barn, and returned a moment later with a roll of quilts. "Mebbe you'd like a hoss? That animal of yours is purty well tuckered."

Lance hesitated, not sure what Zola would say, and not sure what she thought of him, but when the girl said, "You'd better have a horse," Lance nodded.

"I'll give you that bay." Talbot nodded at the third stall. "He'll run with any animal you'll find along the big road. I'll saddle him for you." Later, when he brought the bay into the twilight, Talbot asked, "Want any help on this job?"

"I may," Lance answered, "later. You bar the gate at night?"

"You damned right. It'd take a couple of cannon balls to bat that gate down. Good solid stockade, mister. New posts. Nobody's gonna get in here unless he's got wings to fly."

"Suppose I want to get in at night?" Lance asked.

"I don't open that there gate for nobody unless he knows the password."

Zola laughed. "Hank has a new password for every situation. Give him one, Hank."

"Wal, let's see," Talbot said thoughtfully, "how'd bloody sunbeam do? Sure, you just holler bloody sunbeam, and I'll swing her open. But start hollering afore you get here, or I might be too slow getting her open."

"All right," Lance said, and stepped into the saddle.

Zola walked alongside Lance's bay to the stockade gate. "It is impossible to know who to trust perfectly," she said thoughtfully. "I knew from a letter Starr King sent that you would be along, but you might be someone else who has gained your half of the gold coin illegally."

"It's possible," Lance admitted, "but it isn't true."

"I'm going to think that you're who you say you are," the girl said. "I can't think anything else. We're fighting a war the same as they are fighting it on the other side of the continent except that here we don't know who our friends are. Lance, the man who calls himself Zachary says Clark is his first name, but I wouldn't trust him."

"Why?" Lance asked sharply.

They had reached the gate. Lance looked down at Zola's face, a white blur in the dusk, and heard her breathe, "Lance, if I am to trust you, you must trust me. Whatever happens, be on your guard when you are alone with Clark Zachary. If you are not, he will kill you. He is an agent of the Pacific Republic."

CHAPTER THREE

Killer in the Night

LANCE was surprised by her words, by the deadly seriousness of her tone. He said, "If he's the real Clark Zachary, he can be trusted competely, and he must be, or he

wouldn't have stood up to Ransom like he did."

"That scene could have been a piece of prepared play acting. I know how deadly this game is, Lance. I've been in the middle of it from the day they found my father's body along the bank of the Umpqua."

"Of course," Lance said a little impatiently, "but you have given me no reason to distrust Clark Zachary."

"My father knew Abel Ransom very well. There never was a politician who was more completely a rascal than Ransom, and he's far too sharp to make a scene like the one at the table without another game in mind."

"But what?" Lance demanded.

"Suppose this Clark Zachary knew you were here or would soon be here. Wouldn't such a scene as they staged tonight remove any doubt from your mind that he might be a fraud? Or, if you weren't here, it would convince me and everybody else in the room that he was a fighting Unionist."

"I guess it would, but until I know otherwise, I'll take him at his word."

"You're stubborn," Zola snapped. "One more thing. It would be better if we didn't pretend I was giving you a job. We'll say you were tired from your ride, and wanted to rest. That way I can tell Jasper I had to let you stay here."

"All right," Lance agreed, "and if Clark Zachary asks you where I am, tell him."

Zola made no answer as Lance wheeled his bay and rode north through the meadow and into the forest of giant Douglas firs. Turning into the timber, he traveled far enough so that he would not be seen from the road, but could hear anybody traveling along it. By the time Lance had tied his horse and built a small fire, full darkness had come. He filled his pipe and lighted it, and sat against the trunk of a great fir just out of range of the firelight.

Lance Corrigan knew how right Zola had been when she'd warned him of the deadliness of this game. He knew, too, how slim his own chances were of coming through it alive. Yet he could not see how he could do any differently than he was doing. He needed Clark Zachary's help, and it was his guess that Zachary would find him before morning. There was this gamble he had to take. He could refuse to trust Zachary as Zola had warned him to do, and thereby impair his chance of carrying out the mission he had come back to Oregon to do, or he could take Zachary into his confidence and have double the strength when the showdown came.

LANCE pulled steadily at his pipe, bringing into his mind all the things he had learned since he had come here and at the same time remembering what Starr King had told him. Still he could not see clearly his own line of action beyond keeping a patient vigil beside the road. So he sat through the first hours of blackness, ears keened for sounds that were not natural in the night quiet. He felt the wildness all around him, the wildness of a land not yet tamed. It was a beautiful country marred now by the violence of the times. As yet this violence was no more than a shadow flung across the few who were playing for stakes that meant an empire, a violence brought to Oregon by the greed and cupidity of some, the false patriotism of others.

He was not sure what he heard when the first snap of a broken twig came to him. He had flung more wood on the fire. Now he quickly stepped away from it into the black shadow of a fir trunk, his gun lifting silently from leather. Then Clark Zachary's voice came from the darkness, "You made a target as big as a horse there for a minute, Mr. Corrigan. There are men interested in this game who would like to see you dead."

"Step into the light, Mr. Zachary," Lance said. "Perhaps you are one of those who would be interested in seeing me dead."

"I'm on your side," Zachary said quickly, and came boldly into the firelight. "It seems to me you made a mistake having a fire. From what I hear, you are too valuable a man to lose."

Lance stepped toward the firelight, gun in hand. He said, "Why are you here?"

"To offer my help." Zachary extended his hand, holding his palm so that the firelight fell across it. "If you have any doubts about where I stand after what happened in the dining room, this should dispel them."

There, in the red light of the fire, Lance saw half of a gold eagle. When he reached for it, Zachary let it go without protest. Lance, placing it against his own, found that it fitted perfectly. It would correspond to the half Zola Drager had, and beyond a doubt was one of the coins she had seen Starr King cut.

RELIEF washed through Lance Corrigan then. "I'm glad to see you, Zachary. I thought it was you when you were arguing with Ransom this evening, but I wasn't sure." He handed Zachary's half eagle back to him. "I didn't expect you quite this soon."

"I came as fast as the stage could bring me," Zachary said smoothly. "My instructions were not definite, but I assumed that your errand was of supreme importance. I've been telling everybody that I was a lawyer going on to Jacksonville, and fortunately this affair with Ransom gave me the opportunity I needed to stay over without attracting attention."

"My mission is important enough." Doubt was in Lance again. Starr King had said he trusted Zachary as fully as he did Zola. It was strange, then, that he had not written full details to Zachary. Yet now, looking at this tall, dark man who claimed to be Clark Zachary, Lance found it hard to distrust him.

"The fire." Zachary motioned to it. "I think you're foolish."

"Perhaps," Lance admitted, "but it might be the honey I need to attract flies."

"You might attract bees with stingers, too," Zachary said sharply. "This country is crawling with secessionists, either those who favor the South or the loud mouths like Abel Ransom who have grandiose ideas about the Pacific Republic."

"They wouldn't know who I am."

"They'd be quick enough to guess. Where did you come from, Corrigan?"

Again doubt was in Lance. He had not seen the letter Starr King had written to Clark Zachary, but it was unlikely that King would have given him orders to come here to Black Horse to meet Lance Corrigan without giving some idea of who Lance was and where he came from. So he said cautiously, "San Francisco. I rode straight through."

"A long ride." Zachary smiled. "I wonder if future generations will ever thank us for what we're doing. We're taking as much risk as any soldier in the army, but we get no pay for it and no public recognition." He drew a cigar from his pocket. "This Zola Drager. I understand she doesn't make her opinions known, but secretly she stands high in Jasper Murtree's confidence."

"I've heard the same," Lance agreed.

"You were having quite a talk with her tonight," Zachary said a little sharply as if impatience was beginning to prod him. "Find out anything?"

"She's close-mouthed. She has to be, running a business like that. A very attractive woman. Since seeing her I have thought of moving back to Oregon."

Zachary smiled. "You wouldn't sell out a cause for the smile of a pretty redhead, would you?"

"No. It would take a better price than that." Lance knocked the ashes from his pipe, and slipped it into his pocket. He watched Zachary through a moment of silence, feeling the tension grow between them, and knowing that Zachary felt his distrust. He asked, "You know Jasper Murtree?"

"I've seen him," Zachary answered casually. "It's no secret that he's the boss of the Pacific Republic crowd in this part of the state."

"I suppose his followers get out at night, and drill."

"I've heard that." It was Zachary's turn to be cautious now. "Of course there is a tremendous amount of talk that goes around now with perhaps very little fact behind it. There are the three groups all willing to jump at each other's throats, so you can hear anything."

"But if Murtree's outfit had the arms, they'd raise their flag tomorrow, wouldn't they?"

Zachary shrugged. "Again it's what I hear." He picked up a burning twig, held it to his cigar, and presently tossed it back into the flames. "Sometimes I think there's nothing to this scare we're having. Oregon voted for Lincoln, and that's the end of it."

"You said something this evening about hearing the same kind of talk in Portland, Oregon City, and Salem," Lance reminded him, "that Ransom was giving."

"Oh, sure." Zachary had moved a step toward Lance when he'd lighted his cigar. Now he casually shifted his feet so that he was another step closer. "There are a lot of windbags like Abel Ransom around over the country. It doesn't mean much."

"There aren't exactly three groups," Lance said thoughtfully. "If those who sympathize with the South see that Oregon will not join the Confederacy, they'll work with Murtree and the Pacific Republic crowd. Anything that makes a diversion and places a greater burden on the Northern forces will favor them."

ZACHARY took another bite on his cigar, and squatting on the ground, began breaking twigs and throwing them into the fire. "That's right," he said indifferently, "but this scheme was doomed to failure from the start. It will get about as far as Aaron Burr's hair-brained plot did."

This man was not Clark Zachary. Lance was certain of it just as he was certain that within a matter of minutes he'd be fighting for his life. He saw Zachary's hand go to the top of his right boot. He said softly, "Ransom was wrong about one thing. Albert Sydney Johnson does not command the department of the Pacific."

Zachary's head made a quick turn, surprise and then doubt breaking across his narrow face. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. Edwin Summer took command April 25."

Zachary's eyes were on the fire again. "That will be quite a blow to the secesh

crowd. Corrigan, just why are we here?"

"Didn't Starr King's letter tell you?"

It was the first time Starr King's name had been mentioned. Again Zachary's head turned so that his eyes locked with Lance's. There was surprise in them, surprise that took the last doubt out of Lance. He had no idea what had happened to the real Clark Zachary, nor how this man had obtained the half of the gold coin Starr King had given to a man he trusted. At the moment those answers were not important. He knew that Zola had been right, that he could no more trust this man than he could trust a rattlesnake.

"No, he didn't tell me."

There was silence then, broken by the rush of a horseman riding north at a great and blind speed through the black forest. Lance asked, "Who could that be?"

Zachary made no answer. Lance, watching the man closely, saw him stiffen, become as tense as a watch spring too tightly wound. Then, without warning, Zachary came to his feet in a single, swift motion, right hand lifting upward from boot top in a slashing stroke at Lance's stomach. Firelight glinted redly on the bright blade.

CHAPTER FOUR

Captured

LANCE acted by instinct. He whipped his body sideways, the knife blade ripping through the skirt of his coat and shirt front and laying open a shallow gash across his stomach. Zachary had expected to drive his knife blade through Lance to his backbone, and for one brief moment was totally surprised by Lance's unexpected maneuver. That moment saved Lance's life. He swung a whistling right to Zachary's jaw, and Zachary, caught off-guard, was knocked squarely into the fire.

There was the smell of burned clothes and scorched flesh, and a cry came out of Zachary that was terrible to hear. Two men, riding through the clearing and into the timber, heard that cry and saw the fire. Zachary rolled out of the red coals, and infuriated by pain until he was without reason, came up to his knees, and drew gun. Lance, stepping away from the fire, had no choice but to pull gun and drive a bullet into Zachary. The two shots were so close together that Zachary's sounded like the echo of Lance's. The men on the road, hearing the shots, pulled up, and dismounting, moved toward the fire.

Zachary had died with the impact of Lance's bullet. He fell sideways, fingers digging into the needle-covered earth as the death agony wrenched his body. Lance came toward him slowly, gun still in his hand, and slipped it back into leather only after he was certain that Zachary was dead. It was then he felt the presence of other humans, heard the sibilance of a man's feet moving through the brush, and remembered Zachary's words that the country was crawling with secessionists.

Lance was caught here beside the fire. He had built it to attract others, planning to remain in the shadows himself. Now it was the other way. He was in the light, and whoever was here was keeping in the darkness. If it were Zola and some of her men, they would not remain in the timber without calling to him. His callers were enemies, then, and that being true, any quick movement on his part would only result in a hail of lead.

So Lance waited, and the seconds seemed like hours before Abel Ransom's shrill voice came from the trees between the road and the fire. "Keep your gun in your holster, Corrigan, and stand still. You're under my gun."

Lance caught the round shape of Ransom's fat body as he moved into the outer fringe of firelight. Ransom said, "I'm sorry you killed the boy, Corrigan. He would have gone a long ways in the service of the Pacific Republic."

"Who was he?"

"George Webb was his name. Your partner, Clark Zachary, lies at the bottom of the Willamette River below Albany. We have had him under observation for some time, so when he slipped out of Portland, we followed. He was a brave man, Corrigan. He took terrible punishment before he died, but he never talked."

"How did you know my name?" Lance asked.

"Zachary was in a delirium for a time, and disjointed words and phrases came from his lips. We heard enough to know that he was coming here to meet a man named Corrigan."

There was a cocked gun in Ransom's

hand. Lance could not see what object Ransom had in holding him at the point of that gun and talking freely as he was, but as long as he was talking, there was the possibility that something would happen to give Lance a chance for his life. He asked, "How did he get that half eagle?"

"We found it in Zachary's pocket," Ransom answered. "He said enough to know it was a means of identification."

Apparently neither this George Webb nor Ransom had known Zola's real feelings. The name of Lance Corrigan would have been uppermost in the real Clark Zachary's mind, so he would have mentioned Lance's name in his delirium. Apparently Ransom knew nothing more.

"I thought you were going to Jacksonville?"

"That was for the public just like the little ruckus George and I put on." Ransom laughed softly. "I had business with Jasper Murtree. In case you're wondering, my friend, tomorrow is a big day in the history of this continent. The flag of the Pacific Republic will be raised."

TONIGHT, then, Lance was thinking, was the night. He had to live long enough to smash this conspiracy. Once that flag was raised, men would rally around it. Clark Zachary had given his life to keep that flag from flying. Now, looking across the firelight at the shadowy figure of Abel Ransom, Lance saw no hope of preventing his life from going in exactly the same manner Zachary's had. To lose his life and accomplish the task that had brought him north was no more of a sacrifice than thousands of other men were making, but to lose it uselessly was a terrible thing. Lance Corrigan and only Lance Corrigan could stop this plot before western Oregon was drenched in blood.

Again Ransom laughed, the easy, triumphant laugh of one who has no thought of failure. He taunted, "You don't like the thought, do you? You'd be surprised to know the full strength of our preparations, but you'll never know because you won't live long enough. What brought you here, Corrigan, and why was Zachary to meet you?"

"Zachary was to meet me so there would be two of us to do a job that has to be done," Lance answered. "As to what the job is, I hope I will be as successful in not letting myself tell you as Zachary was."

"He was a brave man," Ransom conceded. "Either way you'll die and I don't think Jasper Murtree will wait long to see that you do. The method of your going could be made easier by talking, however."

"Strange how courage sometimes seeks the wrong channel to show itself," Lance murmured. "This George Webb," he motioned to the dead man, "tried to get me with a knife. Funny he didn't use a gun from the timber without taking a chance himself."

"He was instructed to use a knife so there would be no noise," Ransom said, "and he wasn't to kill you until he'd learned all that could be learned from you. And about that business of courage. Perhaps you should look at it the other way. Why should a brave man like Clark Zachary give his life for a lost cause?"

"It isn't lost," Lance blazed, "and it—."

Lance Corrigan did not finish his sentence. A descending gun barrel from behind caught him across the head and brought him to the ground in a loose-kneed fall.

"About time, Jasper," Ransom said. "I thought he was going to make a break."

"I hoped you'd get something out of him." Jasper Murtree holstered his gun. "We'll leave Webb's body here. I'll send a man back after it. We'll take Corrigan with us. I know ways to make him talk."

"The wagon should be in at Ewing's place by now," Ransom said. "When he sees that—."

"He'll talk I tell you," Murtree snapped. "Bring his horse over here, Abel."

Lance came to with a hammering headache, unable to think what had happened, and for a time not being able to determine the condition he was in. He only knew that at regular intervals a strange thumping sent a spasm of pain racketing through his head. Then it came to him that he was bound face down across a saddle, that those thumpings were the pound of a horse's hoofs against the hard ground. He fainted, and when he came to again, he saw the glow of lanterns, heard the run of men's talk, and Ransom's shrill voice, "Isn't that wagon here yet?"

"It'll be along purty soon now," a man answered. "Ewing just rode in. Said the wagon wasn't very far from here."

"Cut him loose," Murtree ordered, "and bring him into the house easy. He'll get a chance to tell us what he knows."

"Not much time, Jasper," a man said. "We want our flag over the Black Horse by dawn."

"It will be there," Murtree said. "Zola Drager has one to run up. Roseburg is where we may have trouble. How many men here?"

"A dozen."

"Horses saddled?"

"No."

"We won't hurry about that," Murtree said thoughtfully. "Let them rest until we're ready to start. All right. Take this man in."

They took Lance from the saddle, and with his hands tied behind him, half-dragged him into a poorly-furnished log cabin. Ransom was already seated at a table, paper before him, a quill pen in his hand. Murtree took a seat beside him at the table.

"I have no personal animosity toward you, Corrigan," Murtree said, "despite the fact that you struck me. I want you to understand that before we go on. If this cause for which we are fighting was no greater than our personal feud, I would give you a gun, and we'd settle our trouble man to man."

SLOWLY strength and sanity flowed back into Lance. He stared at Murtree's wide face, and managed a sour grin. "You're in position to say that, Murtree, with a dozen men around you."

Jasper Murtree let Lance's words go unchallenged. "Corrigan, you are standing in a court of the Pacific Republic charged with murder and with being an agent of the United States government."

A cold smile touched Lance's lips. "Why don't you just go ahead and shoot me? I know what you are, and you certainly aren't fooling yourselves."

"Have you any thing to say to these charges?" Murtree demanded.

Murtree's eyes had narrowed, and a frown had come to his beefy face, but he still held his temper. Lance, probing for a weakness in the man, could see none beyond the fact that he was a zealot fanatically attached to this nebulous Pacific Republic. Abel Ransom was certainly looking to his own political future. Knowing that if the Union won there would be no lucrative government job ahead for him, he was making a gamble with the forces of the Pacific Republic. It was different with Jasper Murtree. It was, if Lance was gauging the man right, a case of being loyal to his section, of sincerely feeling that the people of the West Coast would be better off under their own local government.

"Well, have you anything to say?" Murtree asked.

"I didn't commit murder," Lance answered, "a fact you know very well. At least Ransom does." He nodded at the fat man. "The man posing as Clark Zachary attacked me with a knife. My defense resulted in his death. As for being an agent of the United States government, I wish I was. I am a private citizen. Nothing else."

"Yet there must have been a definite reason for you being here, and having had instructions from some source to meet Clark Zachary."

They did not, Lance saw, know of his and Zachary's connection with Starr King

any more than they knew of Zola's. They would not hear it from him. He said coldly, "We were two American citizens who knew of a job that should be done."

"And that job?"

"I have no answer for that question," Lance said sharply.

"Corrigan, you are the first man to be tried in an official court of the Pacific Republic. You will die shortly after sunup. The court promises you that. How you die depends upon you." Murtree paused then, a fingertip stroking his wide chin, green eyes almost closed. "This nation is not limited by the Constitution of the United States nor the English common law."

"I understand," Lance broke in, "that your proposed government is based on the plan of the old Venetian republic."

"In some ways," Murtree agreed. "There are some born to rule. The vast majority are born to serve the others. At the moment we are faced with a personal problem. You have information we want, the name of the man or group who sent you and Zachary here to Black Horse Stage Station. I do not like to torture a man, but you will be tortured if you don't talk."

"I have nothing more to say than what I have said."

"Then Heaven help you," Murtree said with sincere regret. "I instruct Bert Ewing to—."

A COMMOTION broke out in front of the cabin. Murtree paused, his eyes raised to the door. A woman's voice rose above the guard's demanding permission to enter the cabin. Murtree called, "All right. Let her in."

It was Zola Drager who appeared in the door, and she was angry. She shoved men aside and came to the desk to stand beside Lance, her blue eyes filled with a great fury. "This man," she pointed at Lance, "ate his supper at my table and left without paying. Why is he here?"

"He is a secret agent," Murtree answered, "and he is an enemy of our republic. Just why he is here and what his plans are I do not know, but I will know before sunup. This is no place for you, Zola. Why did you come?"

"I often ride at night," Zola answered. "You know that, and it is not your business to question me."

"My business covers a great many things these days," Murtree said with some pleasure, "and when I am governor of the new Oregon, you may be sure my power will be felt."

"A citizen still has rights," Zola snapped angrily.

"A female citizen has no rights unless they are given to her by her husband, and when you are my—." Murtree paused as if suddenly realizing he was taking important time to discuss a personal matter. He glanced at the grinning Abel Ransom, at the men standing behind Lance and Zola, and spread his hands in a gesture of weariness. "You will not take this down, Abel. I will repeat my question, Zola. Why are you here?"

"I was riding," Zola said, "and I saw a small fire at the north edge of the clearing. I found a dead man there, the man who called himself Clark Zachary and had an argument with Mr. Ransom." She nodded at Ransom. "I knew you would be here tonight, and I was worried. I didn't know whether everything had gone well or not."

"I understand." Murtree nodded and smiled slightly as if he found the thought of Zola worrying over him a pleasant one. "Go back now. At dawn the first blow for the Pacific Republic will be struck. We will be at the stockade gate. You will see that it is open. Any man in your service who opposes us will die. We will raise the flag and turn south for a fast march upon Roseburg."

This man Jasper Murtree, Lance was thinking, might as well have claimed he was Napoleon. Ambitious and a little mad, he was as dangerous to his country when combined with a politician like Abel Ransom as all the Benedict Arnolds and Aaron Burrs the United States had produced. Despair was in Lance Corrigan. He had failed. Zola Drager had come only to see him die. Whether men like Murtree and Ransom succeeded or not, they would make trouble, and their aid to the South would be in exact proportion to the size of the trouble they made.

"We will get back to our unfinished business," Murtree said briskly. "Bert Ewing, I will leave this man with you. You have learned things from the Rogues that you can put to use on him. See that he tells you what we want. Zola, go on back to the stage station."

BUT Zola didn't move. She said, "I can make this man talk, and when I get done, there will be no marks upon him. Leave him alone with me and Abel Ransom."

Murtree glanced at the grinning Ransom, and shrugged. "Very well. Abel, you may learn some important things. Zola Drager is a clever woman."

"I expect I will," Ransom said, and chuckled. "I'll be anxious to see how a woman goes at a job like this."

Outside a man raised the cry, "The wagon's here."

"We'll saddle up," Murtree said. "Jones and Ewing, break open the boxes, and lean the rifles against the house." Murtree strode out, his men behind him.

"All right," Ransom said impatiently. "Corrigan, I'll give you—."

"You'll give him nothing, Ransom, but you'll take a knife and cut his hands loose." Zola's coat separated enough for Ransom to see the muzzle of the gun she carried, and there was no mistaking her deadly intent if she was disobeyed.

Surprise came first to the fat man's face. He stuttered, "I—I don't understand."

"You'll understand with a slug in your head if you don't do what I say," Zola snapped.

"But Jasper trusts you," Ransom shrilled, anger rising in him now. "He wouldn't have let you—."

"I know he trusts me," Zola said, "which is just one of the mistakes he made. I'm giving you three seconds, Ransom, or I'll kill you where you sit."

Ransom rose then. Taking a knife from his pocket, he stepped around the table, and slashed the rope that held Lance's hands. "You'll regret this," he growled.

"Not as much as you'll regret what you're doing, my fat, parasitic friend," Lance said. He flexed his arm muscles, closed his fists and released them, and took the gun Zola handed him. "Turn around, Ransom, and get what I got a few hours ago."

"Now you wouldn't—," Ransom began, but he turned, and Lance hit him with his gun barrel.

Ransom fell, face down. Lance stirred him with his toes, but Ransom did not move. "He's out for awhile," Lance said, "but I don't see where it gets us except a chance to fight before I die. You've just fixed it so you'll die, too."

"I don't mind," the girl said clearly and without fear, "if Ransom and Murtree die with us. Then their plot will blow up in this part of the country and we will have done what we were given to do." She motioned toward the wagon. "There are a dozen men here now, but before they reach Roseburg, there will be fifty. Armed with those rifles, and with Murtree leading them, they could be really dangerous."

Lance moved to the door. He had heard the big wagon roll into the yard. Now it bulked darkly before him, the horses still hitched to it. He saw the two men leaning over a long box on the ground, heard the steady run of talk from a stable behind the house. Lance Corrigan had come back to Oregon to prevent the load on this wagon from falling into Murtree's hands. He saw a slim chance now of completing that mission. He asked, "How far is it to the stage station?"

"Not far."

"Downhill?"

"All the way," Zola answered. "Why?"

"We're taking that wagon," Lance said, "and we'll ride back to the station."

"You're crazy. Why, we wouldn't get out of this yard."

"It's better than dying here. Get those men inside."

FOR a moment Zola hesitated, her eyes searching his, and Lance Corrigan knew that these last moments had brought them together. There was no distrust between them now. "All right," she breathed, and stepped into the yard.

Lance could not hear what Zola said to the men, but they nodded, and followed her into the house. As they stepped through the door, Lance's gun barrel came down on their heads exactly as it had upon Abel Ransom's.

"With a little practice," Lance said. "I'd get pretty good at this. All right. Let's run for it."

They raced across the yard to the wagon. Lance was in the seat first, and was gathering the lines into his hands as Zola climbed up beside him. He spoke to the horses, and with the first creak of the wagon, Murtree shouted from the stable, "What's going on? Ewing, stop those horses?"

"It's all right, Jasper," Zola called. "We're moving the wagon back to the barn."

The wagon was in motion then, rolling out of the yard and into the road. "Get this thing to moving," Lance yelled, cracking the whip over the horses, "like you never moved anything before, or you'll have two corpses driving this load to hell."

CHAPTER FIVE

Attack

JASPER MURTREE and his men did not seem to realize what had happened until the wagon had gained speed and had disappeared into the dark corridor that was the road. Then curses and cries of rage rose from them. Murtree bellowed, "Get these horses saddled and out of here." He ran to the cabin, found Abel Ransom on his feet beside the table, sick and wobbly, and the other two men still on the floor.

Those were precious minutes before pursuit was organized and on the road, minutes that brought the wagon out of the timber and into the clearing. Lance was working the silk, cracking it like a pistol over the horses, and before he could be heard by Hank Talbot in the stockade, Lance was yelling, "Bloody sunbeam. Bloody sunbeam. Get her open, Hank."

The first pitch below the log cabin had been steep, and the wagon had gained terrific speed. The horses now were racing to keep ahead of it, the wagon creaking and groaning and traveling, as Lance told Hank Talbot afterwards, "as if it had been catapulted out of hell onto a road smeared with grease."

The first gray of day had come now to the clearing, and Zola, looking back, shouted above the racket, "They're right here, Lance."

"What about your men?"

"They're loyal and they have guns." Zola screamed to be heard. "Before I left I told Hank to get them up and have them ready, but they don't have much powder."

"Bloody sunbeam," Lance roared again, and then again, and doubted if anyone in the stockade could hear it above the rolling thunder of the wagon.

"I've got another gun," Zola cried. "Watch your side."

Lance had the lines in his left hand, the gun in his right, and by that thin light of early day, he saw the first of Jasper Murtree's men come alongside the wagon. His gun lashed out with a tongue of flame and a roar that sounded over the noise of the wagon, and the man went out of his saddle in a far, rolling fall. Zola fired once, and Lance again, then the big stockade gate was swinging open ahead of them.

The wagon rocketed through the gate. Lance had no power to stop it. He glimpsed Hank Talbot's bearded face, the shadows of Zola's other men around the yard, muskets in their hands, and he knew that there had not been time to close the gate. Guns roared in front of the stage station. Murtree's men had swept into the stockade.

There was a sickness in Lance Corrigan as the huge wagon rolled on around the stage station. If they could have locked the gate, Murtree's fanatical crew could have been held outside, and the stockade and log house could have been defended indefinitely. The odds would have been in favor of the defenders. Now the odds favored the attackers. If they won, this cargo for whom men had died and were dying now would be again in Jasper Murtree's hands.

"Can't you stop them, Lance?" Zola cried. "If we don't help, my men will be wiped out."

But Lance had no desire to stop them now. Zola had said her men didn't have much powder. This fight had to be won quickly, or it would not be won at all, and Lance was thinking that in this heavy wagon he had a weapon more potent than a dozen loaded muskets in the hands of Zola's men. He shouted at the horses, cracked the whip over them again, and brought the wagon around the stage station and toward the front in a thunder of hoofs and wheels, a great cloud of rolling dust rising behind them.

"You fool," Zola screamed, and shook Lance's arm. "You aren't trying to stop."

"That's right," Lance yelled back. "Hang on."

HANK TALBOT and his defenders had taken to cover. There was no firing as Lance brought his wildly running horses around the corner of the stage station. A knot of horsemen was in front of him. Fat

Abel Ransom was there, and Jasper Murtree, and a half dozen others.

"Dismount, men," Murtree was shouting, "and hunt them down. Shoot every man, and save Zola Drager for hanging. Our flag will fly—."

Then Lance's intent must have been clear to them, for his horses and wagon had cleared the corner of the log house, and was headed straight for them. One of them snapped a shot at Lance. Zola fired back, and they tried to scatter. Some of them got clear, but some did not have time. There was the thud of hoofs on flesh as horses were knocked down and men were thrown under the wagon's wheels; there was a medley of squeals and shrieks and curses; there was blood and raw flesh and broken bones. And here, in front of the Black Horse Stage Station, the hopes of the Pacific Republic were smashed into the dust.

The wagon had roared through that knot of men and gone on to smash into the stockade. There it stopped, the horses badly bruised and broken, a dozen cedar puncheons battered loose from the stockade crossbeams. Lance was knocked out of the seat when the wagon crashed into the stockade. He hit the ground, flat on his belly, and for a moment could not move. He tried to get to his hands and knees, tried to draw breath into his tortured lungs, and could do neither. He heard Zola cry out, "Look out, Lance. Ransom, don't—." Then a shot came from the log house, a long-drawn "Ahhh," was pulled out of Abel Ransom, and his fat body broke at knee and waist, and he sprawled face down into the dust.

Lance was on his feet then. He turned to look up at Zola who was still in the wagon seat. There was a sudden run of silence then, strange and empty after the minutes of chaos, silence broken by Hank Talbot's shouted words from the log house. "I fit in the War of 1812, and my boy fit in the Mexican War, and my grandson's gone back East to fight in this hyar war, and by grab, it looks like I had a hand in it, too."

"It isn't over, old man." It was Jasper Murtree who had fought a bullet-shattered body to hands and knees. There was blood and dust on his face, and even now with death at hand, the fanatical zeal that was in him rose to a still higher pitch. "It isn't over. A cause like this will never die. Hurrah for the Pacific Republic, and may the souls of those who smashed up here be damned to hell. I killed Zola Drager's father, and Corrigan, I'll kill you."

A gun in Jasper Murtree's hand was being lifted from the dust, and the last spark of life in him, as feral as a dying jungle animal, was dedicated to the grim task of taking Lance Corrigan with him. Lance grabbed for the gun in his waistband, drew it, and leaping sideways, fired the same instant Murtree did. Lance felt the tug of the bullet along his left side. Murtree's head dropped, then his arms could no longer hold his weight, and death brought him into the dust.

It was well into the morning before the wreckage had been cleared away, and the stockade mended. Most of Murtree's men were dead. Those who were wounded along with two of Zola's men who had been injured were cared for and in bed.

LANCE, leaning against the wall beside the fireplace in the stage station, grinned at Zola, and ran a hand over his

stubble-covered face. He said, "I feel like I could sleep for a week, and let my whiskers grow."

"What will you do now, Lance?" the girl asked.

"I'll visit my folks in Oregon City, and then I'm going East to join a California regiment. I thought I'd look real handsome in a blue suit."

"You will," Zola said quickly, and came close to him. "Lance, we both made a mistake when you came here. I should have trusted you fully and you should have trusted me enough to have told me why you'd come here."

"I'll tell you now," Lance said, and took her hand. "Starr King hears from a lot of folks like you both here and in California. Somewhere along the line he found out that this wagon load of guns was coming to Murtree's bunch. Of course it's easier to stop a rebellion when it's a spark than when it's a full grown flame, so my assignment was to see that Murtree didn't get the guns. He thought two or three of us could come nearer doing the job than officials who might not be loyal. Now I've got a question. How did you find out that Webb wasn't Clark Zachary?"

"Because when I took him to his room, he showed me the half gold eagle he had, and asked me if I knew how it would identify him to Corrigan."

"He thought you were hand in glove with Murtree," Lance mused. "Zola, I didn't tell you because I was afraid you might tell Murtree just to get something out of him. I should have known better."

"We've lived on suspicion so long," Zola murmured, "that it's hard to trust another person."

"How did you happen to come to Ewing's cabin tonight?"

"From what Murtree told me yesterday," Zola answered, "I knew they were figuring on something big, so I stayed up all night. Then I heard the men ride by, and a little later the guns. I was afraid you were in trouble, and thought I'd better see. I was worried."

Lance smiled. "A good thing for me you did. You know, when they write the history of Oregon, they probably won't even mention the Pacific Republic." Lance tilted her face up so that he could see her eyes, and said, "Someday this will be over, and I'll be back, and you—" He paused, his eyes searching hers.

"Why," she breathed, "I'll be here. Waiting."

THE END

THE MAGIC CARPET

THREE days before he died, Colonel Bill Bartlett, Montana pioneer, still feeling mighty frisky, hired a secretary to take down some of his recollections of the early days of the West. One of the stories he told during those last moments was the yarn of how he made a carpet pan out gold dust for a woman who needed money.

It's the story of Mrs. L. P. Sanders and her magic carpet. Place: Virginia City. Time: 1864.

Mrs. Sanders had children, practically no money, a cabin with a dirt floor and a green carpet. Bartlett was manager of the Diamond City Mercantile Co.

Coarse gold was the medium of financial exchange in those days—it wasn't buried under Fort Knox. Bartlett noticed that prospectors generally spilled a few grains or considerable dust in pouring the gold from their pokes to the gold scales. They would attempt to brush the spilled gold back into their hands but some of it would fall to the floor. If a prospector were tipsy, and many were, most of the spilled gold fell to the floor.

Bartlett asked Mrs. Sanders for her carpet and she gave it to him. He cut the carpet and fitted it under the gold scales. The coarse gold was picked up by the prospectors when it spilled but the fine gold sank into the mesh of the carpet.

When Bartlett figured the particular piece of carpet under the scales had acted as gold catcher long enough he would "retort", or burn the carpet, pan out the leavings and give the gold to Mrs. Sanders.

No one knows how much money the Colonel "panned" out of that old carpet, but one thing is sure—Mrs. Sanders and her kids ate regularly. —*C. T. Sullivan*

Ric fought low and with science, his fists smashing into Watson's midriff.

The Tinhorn Bets on Bullets!

By Lee Floren

Matt Watson was holding all aces until he was called by a last-chance gambler who would rather die than toss in his cards!

WHEN the trouble started, Ric Jones was at the bar, drinking his lemonade. The scuffle of boots turned him, and then the young fellow was knocked against the bar, finally steadying himself against the mahogany six feet away from where Ric stood, his thin face quiet. He had noticed the set-up when he had come into the Silver Lady, noticing it quickly because gambling was his trade. Two housemen had been trimming the young fellow, and doing a good job—a thorough job.

Ric said, quickly, "Take it easy, men!"

Both of the housemen were on their feet, hands on their guns. The young fellow, settled beside Ric, was silent, mouth hard. His right hand, Ric noticed quickly, was on the handle of a gun, too.

"You in on this?" demanded a houseman.

"How can I help it?" answered Ric shortly. "You pile a man right at my feet, then you start to pull against him! Bullets have a way of flying wild and killing bystanders."

The young man started moving down the bar. Ric said sharply, "Stay where you are, fellow!" and the man stopped, undecided. There was a short silence, and Ric felt its danger. He got the sudden impression that there was more to this than met his eye. He had his Colt .38 out, level.

"All right?" he demanded. "What's the play? I check it to you!"

The housemen exchanged quick glances. They were both sallow men, long away from the sun, and their manner of life had marked them, making them thin and deadly. Ric saw they wanted a way out of this. They had tackled a peaceful housecat, and discovered he had a bobcat for a running mate.

The young man said, "This is my fight, stranger!"

"You want to die?" asked Ric.

Now a man came out of a door at the end of the saloon. He was big and seemingly soft from easy living, but Ric noticed there was power in him. He came up and said, "All right, men, take your hands from those guns!" Then, to Ric Jones, "I'm Matt Watson."

Ric shrugged. The name meant nothing. "Thanks," he said.

Watson caught the briefness. Ric saw something harden his small eyes, almost closed by fat. Watson said, "All right, boys, go back to my office," and the housemen turned, crossed the sawdust strip. Watson looked at the young man. "You causing me trouble, Deming?" he asked.

Deming said, fiercely, "Those two ran a crooked game on me! I caught them at it! I called them!"

"You're tired," stated Matt Watson, voice quiet. "You've been gambling all night, and your nerves are raw. Pick up your money out of the sawdust, cash in your chips, and get out of the Silver Lady."

Deming said, "To hell with you, Watson," and then to Ric, "Thanks, stranger." He went out, the doors swishing behind him.

Watson looked at the .38. "You can put that away, stranger."

Ric Jones glanced at the door through which the housemen had left, saw that it was closed. He hefted the Colt and stuck it into leather.

Watson said, "Deming's a fine young man, but he goes off on wild tangents." He sighed slowly. "A privilege of youth, I guess."

"Your men bungled it," said Ric Jones slowly. "They were dealing bad. You should get new housemen, Watson."

Watson stood on wide, heavy legs. His eyes were needle-sharp, probing Ric. "How would you know, stranger?"

Ric turned toward the bar. "When you stand here, that back-bar mirror shows you everything that happens at that table . . . if you use your eyes. One of your dandies had a card in his boot. I saw him switch, and that isn't a hard trick—if you know how—"

HE WAS ducking then, ducking fast. Watson's fist curled over, hung against empty air. Ric was down low, punishing the heavy man. He said, "That back-bar mirror showed me your fist, too," and then he went to work. He was beautiful to watch. He had his legs bent slightly, bringing him lower than Watson's mauling, swinging fists, and he fought low, with science. Watson was tough, though, and he felt the smash of his knuckles. He got the heavy man going backwards, and he found the spot. Watson went down, sitting stupid and bloody on the sawdust. Ric was in the center of the saloon, and his gun was on the door at the far end. One of the housemen, gun up, was coming out, and Ric's bullet smashed the wall beside him.

"Get back in there!"

Ric's second lead hit the man, knocking him backwards, and the door slammed shut. The bartender, a hairy-armed Irishman, leaned against the back-bar, surprise across his blue eyes.

"No game of mine, fellow," he assured Ric.

Ric's glance was cold. "See that it stays that way," he advised.

Watson got to his feet, went to a chair, and sat down. He cradled his beefy head in his dimpled hands. Ric felt the push of raw impatience, a vague disgust. He swung his gun, pouched it, and walked outside. The morning sun was bright, carrying its threat of heat. Compared with the dark, chilly saloon, it felt good and clean and wholesome.

A woman said, "What happened in there?"

Ric studied her momentarily. She was about his age, he figured, and that would make her in her early thirties. She was small, coming to his shoulders, and her hair was dark red, glistening like coils of copper.

"They pushed me," he said. "I shot a man."

She said, "Oh," and went into the saloon. Ric took his gaze from her back and turned it on a man who wore a star—a tired, thin man. "That was it, Mr. Marshal," he said.

"Did you kill the man?" asked the lawman.

"No."

The marshal said, "You wait here, stranger, 'cause I might want to talk to you again," and he too went into the Silver Lady. Ric stood silent, watching this town of Grasshill. Down at the depot, the sound of a train whistle broke the morning, and he heard the chug of drivers as the local freight left town. The marshal came out and said, "You broke Bingo Carter's shoulder. They took him out the back down to the doctor's." He added, "You mussed up Watson some, too."

"Is that all?" asked Ric.

"Your name?"

"What difference does that make?" asked Ric. "I'll leave town soon. I rode in from Saco this morning." He had liked this town and this country, when he had ridden in, but now he saw that man, and greed, had touched it. But he didn't tell the marshal that.

The marshal sighed. "My belly," he said. "It hurts me." He went away, stooped a little, and Ric went to his sorrel, tied to the rack. He was tightening his latigo strap when Les Deming came up. He said, "Thanks, stranger."

"Don't thank me," said Ric. "I was just acting to protect myself."

Deming took this, face stolid. "Just thought I'd thank you," he said slowly. He was undecided, suddenly lonesome. Ric sensed this quickly. Deming said, "They'd have killed me, sir. And then what would Martha—and the baby— I've never seen my son. He was born back home, just a month ago. In Chicago." He asked, "You even been there?"

"Yes," said Ric. He added, "The streets are too narrow, and the air isn't clean. Somebody else can have my share of it."

"That's what we said, too." The excitement had left Deming, and his voice lost its huskiness. "Well, thank you again, mister."

Ric Jones stood for a long minute, looking over the mane of his sorrel, watching Les Deming until the young man turned into the Mercantile. He had a boot in stirrup when a woman's voice said, "You're Ric Jones, aren't you?"

He let his Justin drop. The small redhead stood on the edge of the plank walk. "Yes, I'm Ric Jones. But who in this small town would know me?"

She laughed a little shakily. "I'm Dodi

Smith, Ric. Oh, you don't remember me, but you dealt in the Broken Spur in Tucson, about five years ago. I ran the faro table, way down the saloon from your table." She added, "You seldom saw me. And if you did, you looked right past me. What was Dodi Smith, a woman faro dealer, to the great Ric Jones, who could have any woman he wanted?"

Ric said, "You exaggerate a little, Dodi Smith."

She smiled mischievously. Ric liked it.

"You deal faro here?"

She nodded. "Yes, in the Silver Lady for Matt Watson, my boss whom you so thoroughly worked over a few minutes before. Did you hurt your hands, Ric?"

Ric flexed his left fingers. "One knuckle, a little sore." He got his stirrup again, went up this time. "Well, I wish you luck, Miss Dodi."

She had her hand on his sorrel's mane. "This is nice range, Ric. I own a section of it. I homesteaded a hundred-and-sixty acres and got the rest on my range rights. You can grow feed here for cattle, and since the railroad came through, you could grow wheat and ship it to the Eastern markets. You could run cattle back in the hills, grow wheat and oats on the level land, and feed along the river in the winter."

Ric said, "That's nice, Dodi."

"Look, Ric," she said, quickly. "I know about it, all of it!"

Ric's face was stoney. "What do you mean, Dodi?"

She gathered her thoughts, consolidated them. He saw her do that, and he knew she was looking for the best approach. She found it.

"You and I are alike, Ric. I used to watch you in Tucson—oh, you never saw me! —and I read the loneliness in you. How can I tell you, Ric?"

"You've done well . . . so far."

"You can't run from it, Ric. You have to settle somewhere. I'm leaving the Silver Lady today—I have my little stake made. I want you to ride out with me and look at my place. There's land around it, free land for the filing. You've run a long ways, Ric, and you've looked for the place to settle— It's always over the hill, you say, and I said that, too. I've been here six months; I'm happy."

"Is it that apparent?" asked Ric.

Her eyes were sharp against his, and running laughter was in them. This was an ironical laughter, not serious, but seeming to sit to one side, to deride man and his ambitions.

"To *my* eyes it is, Ric."

THE slow wind was warm and it moved lazily through Dodi's glistening hair. They had their horses on a hill with the tumbling reaches of the valley below them.

"Your place?" asked Ric.

She pointed to a plateau that ran out of the mountains, then dropped quickly to the valley's floor. "The house and corrals are hidden by the rim of the ledge."

Ric nodded. "And young Les Deming's place?"

"North of here, Ric. See where Tumbling Creek turns suddenly, leaving the valley? Right on that bend."

Ric turned his field-glasses on the spread. A log house lay among the cottonwoods, squat and rambling and secure, and he saw hens clucking in the yard. "Les Deming must have stayed in town," he said.

"His wife and baby are coming in on the afternoon train."

Ric lowered his glasses. "Oh . . .?"

A frown played across her high forehead. "Jesse Strange had the place first. Jesse was smart; he filed before Matt Watson could. Matt woke up to the fact that Jesse controlled part of Tumbling Creek. Jesse could turn the water there and irrigate all of the valley."

"And Watson doesn't want that?"

"Oh, he wants it, all right, but not when he doesn't own all the valley. He didn't act fast enough, and the settlers came in quickly. He controls lots of the valley, but he wants it all."

"And Strange? He turned the water?"

Dodi pointed. "Irrigation ditches, Ric."

Ric used the glasses again. "Yes, irrigation ditches." The thing was clarifying, taking body, taking form. With water, the settlers could gain root, hold on. Without water, this dry-land farming— Ric shook his head. Without water, they'd never be able to make any kind of living with dry-land farming.

"Watson tried to buy Strange?"

Dodi nodded. "Strange got pushed—Watson, of course. He finally said he'd sell. But he met Les Deming first. Deming

had just got off the train. Deming bought, cut out Watson again."

Ric thought of that poker game.

"Deming needed money; he got to playing poker. First he won, of course. Then, he started losing— You know the game, Ric."

Sure, he knew it. He'd seen it too many times. Spike a table with housemen, let the sucker win at first, then systematically trim him. Now he understood Matt Watson's wild, uncontrolled anger. He had broken up Watson's game when he had helped Les Deming.

"And Deming still owns his outfit?"

"He needs money, though." She added. "He bought the place high and I guess it cut into him sharply." She shook her head slowly, and the light danced from her hair. "I wonder if he'll try poker again?"

Ric considered. "No, I think he's learned his lesson, Dodi."

"You broke it up, then," she said. "Watson has you marked, Ric."

Ric considered that. There was truth in that. They reached Dodi's homestead and her housekeeper, a gray-haired old lady, had lemonade ready for them, with ice in it. Ric looked wonderingly at the ice and Dodi informed him that she had had ice put up that winter, cutting it from Tumbling Creek and storing it in the ice-cellar. Ric set his drink down.

He walked across the yard, Dodi's collie with him. He stood on the rim, looking down on Tumbling Valley. Mile after mile of land unfolded, lay before him. From here a man could see each movement, each man, each animal, that crossed the grass below. Suddenly the unrest, the loneliness, poured out of him and he settled on his haunches, rubbbing the collie behind his ears.

Dodi came up behind him, "We'd better get back to town, Ric."

They took the down-trail, shale sliding. As they crossed Tumbling Creek, Ric could see Matt Watson and his two housemen sitting their horses in the rocks. Ric had the .38 out when he and Dodi rode up.

Watson said. "Thought you left, Jones?"

"You know my name," Ric said. He studied one of the housemen. "I've seen you before, somewhere?"

"Reno, Jones.""

Ric said slowly, "Don't remember, fellow." He was quiet as he studied them, and the one houseman who had his arm in a sling evaded his gaze.

Matt Watson was looking at Dodi Smith, and Ric caught something in his eyes. "So you're really leaving my faro table, Dodi?"

Dodi nodded.

Watson said, "I'm going to miss you, girl." He turned to Ric then, "You leaving soon, Jones?"

"Don't know, I might put up my tepee here," murmured Ric.

Watson considered that. "There ain't land enough for everybody," he stated.

"We differ there," said Ric.

Watson looked at the .38, then lifted his gaze to the east. A freight train was entering the pass, the smoke of it black against the blue sky. Watson was silent, deadly again, his eyes on Dodi Smith. He jerked himself back. He said, "So long, Dodi," and rode off, his men following him.

Ric sat silent, tight in his leather, as he watched them leave. Then he put the .38 away with, "There's nothing between you and him, Dodi?"

"Nothing. Never was and never will be." Her teeth pushed against her bottom lip. "He's a hard man. He'll push himself to his death, because of this grass." She looked at the sod at her pony's front hoofs. "That grass'll be here when we are all gone, and he knows it but it's his game."

"A deadly game," said Ric.

THEY rode at a long lope, the air good against them. A mongrel barked as they came into Les Deming's ranch. They left their horses with dragging reins, and Ric inspected the place completely, even to peering into the windows of the log house. He went to the check-dam, knelt and let the cold water run through his loose fingers as it turned, going into the irrigation ditch.

Oats grew on a forty. Corn stood high, silk nuzzling the breeze. Ric hunkered, let the loose brown soil, rich and loamy, trickle through his fingers. Alfalfa was ripe for cutting.

Ric asked, "What did he give Strange for the land?" and Dodi said she thought about five thousand. Ric moved a little, his money-belt across his belly, and smiled a trifle. He got up, serious and hard and looked at her, marking again her quiet, mature beauty, her gleaming hair.

"You're a lovely woman, Dodi," he said.

"You're appraising land, not me," she corrected. Yet Ric saw the play of her quick, lonesome smile.

They loped into town. Matt Watson stood in the shade, and he nodded to Dodi. They left their horses at the livery-barn.

Dodi asked, "What about it, Ric?"

Ric said, "We'll see. What are you going to do now?"

"I have to be getting back to my ranch by sundown. I'm no town lady any longer —tomorrow morning I'll get the hired hand out and help him milk the cows. Oh, I've done that, before." She held out her hands. "Callouses, Ric. Pitching hay." She laughed quickly.

Ric looked at her palms. Suddenly, he remembered her plateau ranch: he remembered the surge, the flow, of the land below the ridge, of the wind that sang in the high pine.

"I'll see you before I leave," she said.

Ric watched her straight back, then turned as Bingo Carter, the houseman he had winged, came up, arm in sling.

Carter asked, "You really buyin' chips in this game, Jones?"

"Matt Watson shoved some my way," said Ric easily. "I won't buy them, I'll just take them, Carter."

Carter drew his boot across the dust, the toe downward. Suddenly he said, "All right, Jones, that answer is enough for me. Ed Hanley an' Matt Watson can buck your gun; I want no bullets from it. I've tasted it enough."

"Sensible. . . ." murmured Ric.

"I'll see you in Winnemucca," said Bingo Carter. "Or maybe in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras."

"You won't see me," promised Ric.

Carter went to the barn. Ric waited, and soon Carter rode out. He sat a bay stud, a high-stepping horse, and he lifted his hand to Ric, who nodded back. The marshal saw this, sitting on his bench in front of his office, and he hobbled over to Ric, the pain apparent on his thin face. He said, "He's leavin', I see."

Ric said, "I guess he is." His eyes were flat on the star-man. "You don't look so good, mister. "

"My belly. It gives me hell. Too much restaurant cookin', I guess. Shoulda got married, but it's too late for my belly now. Ulcers, the medicos say. Milk diet."

"Better than whiskey," admitted Ric. He added, "Or hot lead."

"Don't get me wrong," said the man hurriedly. "I don't wear Matt Watson's collar, I stand on my Justins. The farmers have heard about you, I understand, and they've got together, a few of them."

Ric nodded.

"They need a man like you," said the marshal. "They need a leader."

Ric said quickly, "They can fight their own battles, fellow," and moved down the street. Les Deming came out of a store and he called, "Jones," and Ric was turning, the .38 coming up. He saw Deming and shoved the gun back in his holster, scowling.

"Be careful," warned Ric. "Never holler that sharp to a man!"

Deming looked at the gun. He said, shakily, "Matt Watson is making fight talk against you, and Ed Hanley is backing him."

"Why?"

"The farmers," said Deming. "They're coming to see you, askin' you to settle here." He was silent ten seconds. "They need your gun, and your nerve."

"Where are they now?"

"In meeting, at Red Rock schoolhouse. Ten miles east."

Ric said, "To hell with them." He went to turn, stopped, looked at Les Deming again. "You're a young man, Deming. You've got a long time to live, and a good life ahead—unless you cross Watson and Hanley again. Your wife is coming?"

"In fifteen minutes, they say at the depot. With our baby."

"Sell out to me?" asked Ric.

Deming debated, chewing his bottom lip.

"I'll give you a profit," said Ric. "Five hundred over what you paid Jesse Strange. You can move east. There's land there—good land—and there's no Matt Watson. You owe that to your wife."

Deming said, almost too quickly, "All right, Jones, all right." He was smiling now, light when the load was lifted. "We'll go into the marshal's office and make out the papers. He's recorder for this end of the county."

THEY turned and went down the street, Deming young and quick, Ric Jones wiry and neatly-dressed, his grey suit

pressed, his half-boots polished. There in the marshal's office they made out the bill of sale and the money exchanged hands, with young Les Deming prodding the sick man to more speed. The train was whistling when the deal was through. Deming scooped up his money, and left on the run.

"Luck, Jones," he hollered.

"I'll need it!" Ric's smile was brief.

Dodi came in just then, looking behind.

"Here comes Martin Johnson," she said. "He farms out on Diamond Willow Creek. He came from Mississippi a year ago, and Matt Watson is pushing him hard."

Ric said, "I'm not a professional gunman, Dodi. He has his fight, I have mine. Yes, I can see where we need to stand together, but I don't care to lead them. I mean that, really."

He was tired, and she saw this. Johnson left his ewe-necked bay and came along the street, and then he saw Dodi. He was a thin man, and when he lifted his old hat, Ric saw that his sorrel hair was sparse. Dodi said, "Meet Mr. Jones, Mr. Johnson."

Johnson shook hands. "We were talking about you, Jones. News got to us that you're bucking Matt Watson, and the farmers want me to tell you that we're behind you, even to bullets."

"Thanks," said Ric.

Johnson sensed his coldness; he glanced at Dodi. She said, "When we stay together, Ric, we'll be hard to break. A group of men, even though some of them are not fighters, are a tough, hard bunch."

"I guess so," murmured Ric.

Johnson read his answer then. He lifted his shoulders, let them fall. "Think it over, Jones," he said quietly. He looked at the street, eyes sunken with thoughts.

Ric said, "I'll do that.""

Johnson moved outside, slow and quiet, and Ric saw him go into the Mercantile. Dodi said, "I need some supplies," and followed the man into the store. Ric thought, *They want to talk, and she'll tell him I'll probably lead the grangers,* and that brought an ironical smile to him. A gambler leading grangers. . . .

Ric walked to the depot. The passenger train was coming in, steam white around its cylinders. The marshal stood on the sidewalk and looked hard at Ric. Then he came down the plank sidewalk, heading for the depot.

The train stopped. It was a small train —a passenger-coach and two boxcars: a mixed passenger-freight. A girl came down, carrying a baby. She was slim and pretty. She stood there holding her baby in his blue blanket. Then Deming was kissing her and she was crying in happiness. Ric felt something move inside of him.

"Meet Ric Jones, Martha." said Les Deming. "He just bought our farm."

"He did! But where will we—?"

"We're getting on the train and going

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to the end of the line. We'll take up a new homestead. I haven't used my homestead rights. There's better land there." Deming's glance was quiet and significant over her head at Ric.

"That's so," said Ric.

She was smiling again. She pulled down Deming's head and kissed him on the mouth. "Just so we are together, Les. That is what counted. Well, I am very glad I met you, Mr. Jones."

Ric nodded, gravely.

"All 'board," hollered the conductor.

The Demings went into the car. The conductor gave the highball and the train started moving. He slammed shut a box-car's door, caught the steps of the passenger coach, and lifted a lazy hand to Ric.

Ric nodded back.

Suddenly, he turned sharply. Matt Watson and Ed Hanley, his other houseman, were coming toward him. They walked hard across the stretch of boot-packed gravel between the depot and the main street.

A cold hand wrapped itself around Ric's belly.

"All right!" He was sharp, alert. "What do you two want?"

Watson stopped, heavy and thick. They were forty feet away, and Ed Hanley moved out, leaving twenty feet between himself and his boss.

Ric said, "Don't move any father, Hanley!"

Hanley stopped, hand on his .45.

Watson spoke thickly. "So you bought Les Deming's spread, huh?" He did not wait for answer. "And you intend to lead the sod-busters against me?"

Ric felt a heaviness. Mixed with this, was a fear of this danger. There were two of them: one big, staunch; the other, lean as the wind. Behind them, the street was deserted, the people pulled back. He wondered, suddenly, where Dodi Smith was, and he wondered why he thought that.

"Can you talk?" rasped Matt Watson.

"I bought Deming's spread," said Ric. His voice was thin, distant.

Hanley said, "We better get this over with, boss."

RIC saw it then, and it lay clear. They were making an example of him. They'd ruthlessly, coldly, cut him down. They would smash him with bullets, and the farmers would see, and profit thereby. He was the pivot about which the whole set-up turned. Circumstances had made him that.

Watson was crouched, pulling.

Ric was on one knee, the .38 spitting. He figured Watson was the faster, and he saw he was right. For already the man's gun was rising, lifting over leather. Watson was solid, and Hanley was lithe. Ric placed two bullets against Watson's outline, and he felt the smash of gravel against his thigh. Watson grunted, and doubled, standing on all fours, his gun forgotten and idle on the gravel.

Ric's .38 twisted to cover Hanley. Then, smashing across the roar, came the dull, terrible boom of a shotgun. Ric held his weapon, barrel up, smoke trailing. Hanley was down, flat on the soil. And the marshal, bent with pain, came from the corner of the depot, his shotgun jutting.

Ric said, "Thanks, fellow."

"You damn' fool! Two against one! I thought something like this would happen, so I trailed you."

Watson went down, then. His elbows fell away, and he lay on his belly. Men were moving, running, and the doctor came. Ric felt sick, shaken, as he got to his feet. Dodi rode up, sitting her horse, and leading his.

"Get into saddle," she said.

He did, acting mechanically.

"Are you all right?"

He said, "Yes." And added, "Thanks to the marshal."

The marshal came up, pain-lined face gaunt, sunken. "They're both dead," he said.

Dodi said, "Come, Ric."

They rode out, stirrup to stirrup, heading for her ranch. Ric pulled the air into his lungs, and his unrest left him. They went that way for a mile, neither speaking, and finally Dodi said, "Are you all right, now?"

Ric said, "Yes."

Her eyes were deep. "Well, Ric, that's settled, you old rascal. We'll start this ranch, then, combining your outfit and mine? The Jones—Smith iron, huh?"

Ric considered that. He put his arm around her. "Let's make it just the Jones iron," he said.

Many a trapper "lost his hair" to the various Indian tribes.

By Brett Austin

Hold Onto Your Hair!

THE Comanche were out buffalo hunting when they found young John Hobbs trying to hide in a ravine north of the Upper Arkansas river in 1835. The hunters captured him and took him into their camp. Old Wolf, head-chief of the tribe, studied the white boy through time-dimmed eyes as the sixteen-year-old youth stood in the center of the war council.

"You Texan?" asked Old Wolf.

John Hobbs knew that the Comanches hated Texans. "I'm from Missouri," he said. He did not lie—he had been born near Independence, Missouri.

Old Wolf drank heavily from the brandy

Already, too many Texas scalps were drying on Comanche lodge-poles, and John Hobbs had no intention of adding his to the bloody pile—even if it meant turning Indian!

bottle that had been tied to Hobbs' saddle when the hunting party captured him. The grizzled old chief's eyes had lighted up when he spied the bottle. He had untied it and shook it and listened to the liquid inside. He had held it up to the sun and smiled when he saw it was almost full.

"I take the bottle." He drank immediately. He lowered it. "You give him to me?" He peered at John Hobbs.

The youth gladly gave the savage the brandy. He would have given the Comanches anything they wanted—except his life, and he might have to give that. He had been going west with a wagon train bound for Santa Fe, the great southwestern trading post. The night before he had shot a buffalo cow and wounded her. The cow had swum the river and he had been anxious to get her for meat.

He had followed and killed her, but night had settled quickly, as it does on the plains, and he had become lost. When morning came the Comanches found him in the ravine.

Chief Old Wolf drank again. "We hold council, tomorrow, too." But the council was never held. Hobbs wasn't a Texan, that was a strong point in his favor, but the strongest point was the brandy, for Old Wolf got drunk and gave him his choice of death—or living as a member of the tribe. Hobbs elected the latter.

He lived for a number of years with the Comanches. Old Wolf liked Hobbs so well, even without a bottle of brandy, that he gave him his daughter for a wife. But in his early twenties Hobbs went back to white man's ways when he and Kit Carson, the great trapper and guide, left Bent's Fort and hit into the Rockies on a trapping expedition.

Two men in buckskin . . . and the entire Rocky Mountain area got to know them. The fur rendezvous on Green River in Wyoming was the meeting place of all the trappers. Here the fur gentry gathered each spring to sell their winter catches of beaver, marten, bobcat, mink and other pelts to fur-company buyers.

Many of the trappers "lost their hair" to the various Indian tribes—the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Blackfeet and Sioux—to mention a few of the redskin clans. Their mutilated bodies rotted in mountain buckbrush while their scalps dried on lodge poles in Indian villages. But John Hobbs went through his trapping days with his hair remaining where Nature originally placed it. He knew how to speak many Indian tongues, how to use sign language, and better than that—he knew the redskin's nature.

With the start of the Mexican war, John Hobbs became a soldier. He came out with an excellent record, and when the war ended he was in Mexico. Still wearing his original hair Hobbs used to say, "I ain't got as much of it as I had, but what I have is where it should be."

Hobbs stayed in old Mexico. There were gold and silver in the mountain streams and ore veins and he went into mining. He would make a fortune and two months later—or maybe only two weeks later—he would be poor again. But that was not depressing to a man with John Hobbs' philosophy. He would hit it again and in a short time be back up.

While in Mexico he helped overthrow the government of Maximillian, a Hapsburg prince sent to Mexico by the French king to establish a monarchy. Mexican patriots revolted against him, and Maximillian died before the firing-squad, and John Hobbs was present at the historic execution.

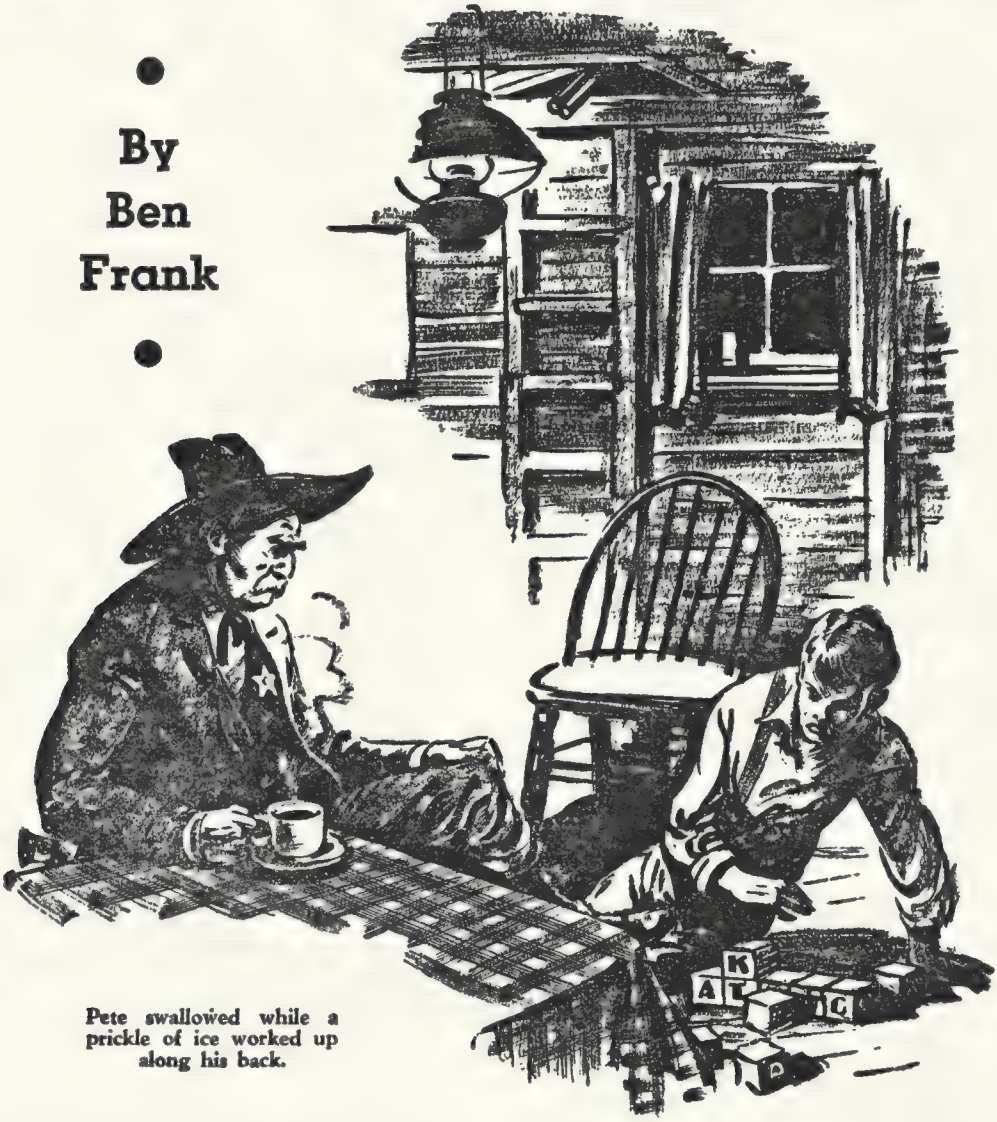
Later John Hobbs fought Apaches in the Mexican territory of Chihuahua. He was especially appointed to this task by the governor. The Apaches were raiding, burning, and killing on each side of the Border. Hobbs got his share of them—and there was no limit on the number a man could kill. And through it all he kept his "hair" intact.

California also knew him. At that time the Golden State was passing from the hands of Mexico to those of the United States. The great Gold Rush was on and Hobbs was in the middle of it. He was a young man in his early thirties but he had crammed more action and adventure into those three decades than most men do in a lifetime.

He was rich . . . then poor. Gold played out and he returned to old Mexico, staying for some time. Hobbs died in the late Nineties near his hometown of Independence. And he died with his hair on!

Three's a Crowd—Kill One!

By Ben Frank



Pete swallowed while a prickle of ice worked up along his back.

Twin-barreled death pointed squarely at the youngster's back, while Pete Bixby sought to build a buckshot-proof barricade —out of a child's set of blocks!

PETE BIXBY'S pa handed down the last box out of the dusty attic of the one-room cabin; then let his long legs slide through the trap door and dropped to the rough pine floor with a heavy plomp. He had to steady himself against a chair to keep from falling, but Pete pretended not to notice, even if he did feel sick about the way his Pa had been going to pieces.

Pete emptied the box on the floor, and

he and his Pa stared at the pile of battered old toys and homemade wooden blocks. Stared so hard they didn't see the red-whiskered face at the one window.

Seeing the toys carried Pete back to past happy Christmases and birthdays in the little cabin. There wouldn't be any more days like those here again. A lump shoved up into his throat, and he swallowed hard. A fourteen year old kid is too big for lumps in his throat, even if he is kind of skinny and small.

Fred Bixby dropped to his knees beside the toys and picked up a small red wagon. "I remember when I brought this home," he said, his voice sounding gentle for the first time since he'd told Pete that they were leaving the little ranch. Leaving —that was why they were cleaning out the attic. Getting ready to pull out from the only home Peter had ever known.

"It was a week 'fore Christmas," his Pa went on. "You was five then. You almost caught me hidin' this wagon in the attic. Your Ma laughed a lot about that."

Pete's Ma had been dead four years now, and things hadn't been going so well since. Not with the dry years. And his Pa depending more and more on the black bottle in the cupboard to drown his worry and unhappiness.

"I remember, too," Pete said, huskily.

Fred Bixby glanced up quickly at his son. "Look," he said, his thin face tightening, "there's lots of good places to live besides this shack." He shoved to his feet, dropping the wagon and scattering the heap of toys and blocks. He shuffled to the cupboard and took a deep drink from the black bottle.

"Ain't no use you feelin' bad about leavin'," he said, his voice harsh. "We can't hang on any longer. An' that's that!"

YEAH, that was that, and Pete knew it. The fire crackled in the range, and outside it was snowing again. He shoved one of the lettered blocks back toward the heap of toys with his scuffed boot toe.

"Guess we won't have room for this stuff," he said.

"'Couse not," his Pa answered, not looking at him.

The snow kept coming against the window. Fine as dust. Silent.

"We can start a fire with the blocks in the mornin'," the man added harshly. "Save cuttin' kindlin' tonight. By the next night, we'll be on our way an'—"

A knock at the door stopped him. Pete swung around and opened the door, feeling the cold clutch at him like invisible fingers. A heavy man stood on the sill, grinning down at him. He had a white mustache and a red face. He always reminded Pete of Santa Claus, Sheriff Cam Polly did.

"Howdy, folks," he said.

"Come on in. Cam," Pete's Pa invited. Pete, get Cam a chair.

"Don't bother, Pete." The sheriff looked at Fred Bixby, and his round face clouded. Pete didn't miss a thing. He knew what Cam was thinking. Thinking that his Pa was hitting the bottle pretty hard.

"Just stopped by to warn you that the Shotgun Kid was seen in the valley t'other day. Just wanted to tell you so's you'd kinda keep a loukout. He likely won't bother you, but you can't tell about that feller."

Pete felt his heart skip a beat. The Shotgun Kid was a bad one. No question about that. People said the stock of his sawed-off shotgun was full of murder notches. Kill crazy, they called him. Pete shivered when he thought of it.

"He'll make tracks for Eagle Pass," Fred Bixby said. "You won't corner the Shotgun Kid in the valley, Cam. Not him."

"Reckon not," the sheriff sighed. "We're headin' for the pass now, but I suppose we're about three jumps behind him."

"You better let us fix you some coffee," Pete's Pa offered, his eyes shifting to the cupboard. He ran his tongue over his lips, and Pete knew he was thinking about the bottle.

Sheriff Polly shook his head. "Gotta be on my way. I knowed you was expectin' to go through the pass before it got snow-blocked, and I wanted to warn you to keep your eyes open. You can't tell about the Kid. If he takes a notion—" He glanced at Pete's white face and stopped. "Snow's gettin' thicker. You better not start out till you see what this storm's goin' to do, Fred."

"We aim to go tomorrow," Bixby said.

"We'll stop by on the way back an' let you know about the pass," the sheriff promised. "You better wait till you hear from us."

He stamped back to his horse and swung into the saddle. The horse turned, kicking up the thin snow, and the sheriff joined his two deputies.

Pete closed the door and turned to his Pa. "Suppose the Kid is still in the valley? Suppose he wanted more notches on his gun an'—"

"Forget the Kid," Bixby said thickly. "We got to load the wagon." He wiped a hand across his seamed face, reached into the cupboard for the bottle. "The Kid's worth five thousand, dead or alive," he muttered hoarsely. "I'd like to meet up with him. If we had that money, Pete—"

Pete looked at his Pa and felt a deeper worry. The man was drunker than he'd thought to be talking like that. Why, they didn't have a gun on the place, and if they did, what chance would they have against the Shotgun Kid. He shuddered.

"We can get along without that money," he said. "Hadn't I better take down the pictures? An' the lookin' glass?"

His Pa dropped heavily on a chair. "I ain't no good, Pete," he muttered. "I got to rest a minute. You go ahead—"

The door opened. Pete didn't hear it open. He just felt the icy wind on his back. But it wasn't the cold wind that made a stab of fear shoot through him. It was the look on his Pa's face. A look of shocked horror.

PETE turned toward the door. Someway he knew what he would see there. He hadn't been wrong. It was the Shotgun Kid, all right, looking just like people said he looked, tall, with red hair and a red beard. And eyes that were always a little bloodshot around the sky blue pupils. And a sawed-off shotgun resting in the crook of his left arm.

The man came into the room and shut the door. A little shower of snow slid from his wide shoulders and settled on the pine floor. There it grayed and became drops of water.

"Hist yore hands!" the man said.

Pete's arms felt like lead weights as he lifted them. Back of him he could hear the snow swishing gently against the window. And his Pa's quick breathing.

The Kid stepped over to Fred Bixby and patted his pockets. Then he turned to Pete. He grinned a little, showing his stained and crooked teeth. He sidled up to Pete, ran his fingers over the boy's pockets. After this, he made a quick survey of the room, stopping at the cupboard and fumbling with the black bottle. But he didn't take a drink. Not then.

"Who does the cookin' around here?" he asked.

Pete's Pa didn't say anything. He looked sick and helpless. Pete swallowed and found his voice. "I can cook," he said.

The Shotgun Kid lifted the short, wicked weapon. Pete could see the notches in the stock, but he didn't have time to count them.

"Now that the sheriff's gone, you can git busy!" the Kid said. "I'm downright starved."

He went over to the cupboard, while Pete stuffed some split oak into the stove. Pete could hear the man pouring a drink

into a glass. When he glanced up, the Kid was wiping a sleeve across his red whiskers and licking his lips like a hungry wolf.

There wasn't a lot to fix. Some potatoes and bacon and coffee. A pot of cold beans to warm up and a hunk of cornbread.

The Kid laid his gun on the table and settled his thick body on a chair. Pete set the food before him, and the man began to eat. Noisily. Almost savagely. Once Pete's pa got unsteadily to his feet and started for the cupboard. The Kid reached toward the shotgun, and Fred Bixby backed to his chair and slumped into it again. The outlaw grinned and winked at Pete. There was something in the wink that froze the boy's blood. It was like a wink from a cold-eyed rattler that was ready to strike. Or like a wink from the Devil himself.

"More coffee," the Kid said, and Pete filled the cup, his hand shaking until he spilled some on the table.

The Kid gulped the coffee, fished a toothpick out of the cracked china holder and stuck it between his thick lips. His bloodshot eyes moved over the room, to the door, to the window with the snow sliding over it, back to Pete's Pa. He shoved to his feet and cradled the shotgun in the crook of his arm.

"I never liked snow," he said. "That's why I turned back and stopped here. I like to be comfortable. Once I got caught in a blizzard an' like to froze." He let his eyes wander about the room. "I'll just stay here till it clears up. Too early for much of a snow."

Pete found his voice. "We was leavin' tomorrow. Movin'."

The Shotgun Kid grinned a little. "Mebbe you are. Mebbe not." His eyes centered on Fred Bixby's lined face. "You know," —his voice was scratchy, "three's a crowd. There's one too many of you here fer me to watch. Easy enough to keep a eye on one, but two—"

Pete felt a wave of sickness sweep over him. The Shotgun Kid could mean but one thing. Pete tried to say something, but his voice wouldn't work. Neither would his feet. He stood rooted by the rusty stove, shivering.

The Shotgun Kid lifted the sawed-off gun until its two black muzzles pointed at Fred Bixby's face. "I don't need you around here, mister! Stand up and walk through that door!"

Fred Bixby's face had gone chalk white. Outside the wind changed, making the fire in the stove rattle the warped lids. Bixby didn't move. He just stared at the shotgun.

"He's been sick," Pete managed weakly. "He oughtn't to go out without his coat."

The Kid laughed. A saw against a nail kind of a laugh.

"He won't need a coat," the Kid declared. He pulled back the right hammer on the shotgun. "Stand up!"

FRED BIXBY got to his feet and braced himself against the chair. He looked at Pete, drew a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. He was cold sober now and looked more like the man he'd once been. Except for his paleness.

"I'll go," he said, his voice clear. "You take care of yourself, Pete. Be a good boy, an'—"

"Shut up!" the Kid hissed.

He leaped to the window and glanced out. His eyes turned to slits with fire behind them. "Someone's comin'," he grated. "Don't make a move!"

Ignoring the ladder he set a chair under the trap door of the attic, stepped up on it and climbed into the attic.

"Move that chair," he said to Pete, his eyes burning down from the darkness of the attic. "Against the wall where it was. That's it. Now, come back and sit down by them toys right under this door. Act like you're playin' with 'em. Don't move away. Don't get up." The eyes fixed on Fred Bixby. "I'll be up here with my gun aimed at the kid's back. Like this. See? If anything goes wrong, I'll blast him wide open. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

The trap door lowered to within an inch of being shut. "Play with them toys, kid!" the Shotgun Kid hissed.

Pete sat cross-legged by the pile of old toys, his back toward the trapdoor. He felt sticky with sweat, and yet a wave of cold played up and down his backbone. He picked up the red wagon. One of the wheels was broken, he noticed. That must have happened when his Pa dropped it. He reckoned if he had a little time and his

knife back, he'd be able to fix it. Just thinking about how he'd whittle out some new spokes helped him forget the gun at his back.

A heavy fist pounded at the door. His Pa let go of the chair back and shuffled to the door. He turned the knob and pulled the door back. Pete could feel the cold air against his face. It smelled clean and sweet.

Sheriff Cam Polly stood in the doorway, his big shoulders sprinkled with white flakes, his Santa Claus face grinning. Pete caught his breath. Suppose Cam should suspect that something was wrong and start looking around? Suppose Pete shivered, remembering that shotgun pointed at his back.

Cam kicked the snow off his boots and waddled inside. "Met a trapper comin' from Eagle Pass," he said. "Feller said the pass was closed—snow-blocked. We turned right around an' come back. Thought I'd stop an' tell you so's you wouldn't start out tomorrow like you aimed to do."

Pete's Pa wiped his hand over his damp face. "Thanks, Cam," he muttered.

THE sheriff's eyes whipped over the room. "Reckon I could go for a cup of coffee, Fred," he said. "That cold kinda eats into you." He winked at Pete and grinned.

Pete swallowed, grinned and winked back, while a prickle of ice worked up along his back. Pete's Pa shuffled over to the stove, got the coffee pot and filled a cup.

The sheriff took the cup. "Fixin' to pack up your toys, Pete?"

Pete shook his head and began to shuffle the blocks around. "Can't take much with us," he answered. "Got to throw this stuff away." His skin felt like a lot of cold feathers were running over it. Up there in the attic, the Shotgun Kid would be listening, and his finger would be hooked around the trigger of the gun. If anything went wrong—

The sheriff sipped the coffee. It was too hot to drink right off, so he blew across the steaming liquid. "Boys grow up on a feller mighty fast," he said to Fred Bixby.

Bixby nodded. "Sure do," he mumbled.

The sheriff tested the coffee. "Yes, sir. Never will forget—"

Pete began to stack up the blocks, while all the time his hands shook like leaves in a wind. But doing something with his hands was better than just sitting there and wondering how it felt to have a load of buckshot come tearing into you.

"Now, there was my boy, Bill," the sheriff was saying. "You remember Bill?"

Pete put five blocks on the bottom row, three on the second, two on the third, making a neat pyramid out of them just like when he was a little tyke.

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"Don't seem hardly no time at all when my boy was little an' playing with blocks," the sheriff said.

Pete's Pa had flopped down in the chair again and was eyeing the cupboard thirstily. Pete picked up another block to top the pyramid, but his hands were shaking so that when he went to place the block, he upset the whole pile. They made quite a clatter. His Pa jumped. It didn't take much to make his Pa jump these days.

Sheriff Polly set the empty cup on the table and snuggled his bald head into the cap. "Well,"—he held up his hand, "if I don't see you again, Fred, good luck. You, too, Pete." He shook hands with both of them and went out into the snow.

"Believe it's gettin' colder," he said, and shut the door.

Fred Bixby let out a little sigh. A moment later, Pete heard saddle leather squeak and hoofs strike the frozen ground. The trapdoor opened and the Shotgun Kid dropped to the floor.

"You did all right, you two," he said, going to the window. "An' it's a good thing you did!"

He turned from the window and lifted the gun. "We'll give the sheriff time to get outa hearin' distance before we go on from where we left off. Three's still a crowd, you know."

The snow kept coming against the window, and the fire flared up with the little puffs of wind. There wasn't any other sounds that Pete could hear except the wild hammering of his heart and his Pa's heavy breathing.

Time dragged. Centuries of it. Still the Shotgun Kid waited. He wanted to make sure that Cam Polly was a long ways off. Far enough, at least, so he wouldn't hear the blast of a shotgun.

At last, the Kid sidled to the cupboard and took out the black bottle and measured the contents against the fading light. A thin smile crossed his face. He laid the shotgun on the table, filled a glass half full of whisky and lifted it toward his lips.

The window at his back crashed into the room, the glass showering across the floor. The Shotgun Kid whirled, his drink slipping from his fingers, the glass smashing against the corner of the table. His hands clawed for the sawed-off weapon.

"Freeze!" a voice growled, and a rifle barrel came in through the window.

The Kid froze, his hooked fingers within an inch of the gun stock.

The door whipped open, and Cam Polly walked into the cabin, a gun in his hand. "Back against the wall," he said in a deadly voice, and the Kid backed against the wall, keeping his hands high.

Two deputies followed the sheriff into the room. Before Pete could get his breath, they'd handcuffed the outlaw.

The sheriff gave Pete a wink. "Thanks for the tip-off, Pete," he said. "Looks like you've got a nice hunk of reward comin', an' I'll see that you get it."

Pete's pa got to his feet. "What's that?"

The sheriff grinned. "Tip-off. With them letter blocks. He piled 'em so's they said, 'SG KID ATTIC.' Noticed the trapdoor wasn't quite shut. So I went after my men, an' we slipped back on foot. Smart boy, you got, Fred. Got plenty of guts." His eyes turned to where the black bottle sat on the table. "More guts than some older people I know." His voice softened. "You owe your boy somethin', Fred. Somethin he ain't been gettin' lately. An' with this reward money, you should be able to stay on here an' work things out. That is, if you want to bad enough."

He turned abruptly toward the door. "Let's go, men."

The deputies shoved the Shotgun Kid out of the cabin.

Pete looked up at his Pa. The man took hold of his son's thin shoulder and shook him gently. He didn't say anything. He just gave the boy a one-sided grin that meant more than all the words he could have said in a year. Then he went over to the table, picked up the black bottle and heaved it through the broken window. It landed with a crash outside.

A great bubbling happiness filled Pete, but he didn't let on and he didn't look at his Pa. Or say anything.

"Got to nail something over that window," his Pa said at last.

"Yeah," Pete managed. "An' we got to clean up these old toys."

"Since we're stayin' on here, we'll put 'em back in the attic," his Pa said. "We might want 'em again some day. You never can tell."

TRAIL BLAZERS of the FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC · W · WINDAS

1

No tale of Boone May, gun-guard de luxe and original "Deadwood Dick" of song and story, would be complete without a recital of his thrilling adventure at Canyon Springs in the Black Hills of Dakota in 1878. Renegades plotted to rob his beloved coach "Old Ironsides," and killed the driver without warning.

2

With the same treacherous blast they wounded Boone May. Then the outlaws raided the relay station where valuable treasure was held for secret transhipment in the Deadwood coach. With the aid of a plucky passenger, May crawled to a nearby rock and opened fire on the relay station.

3

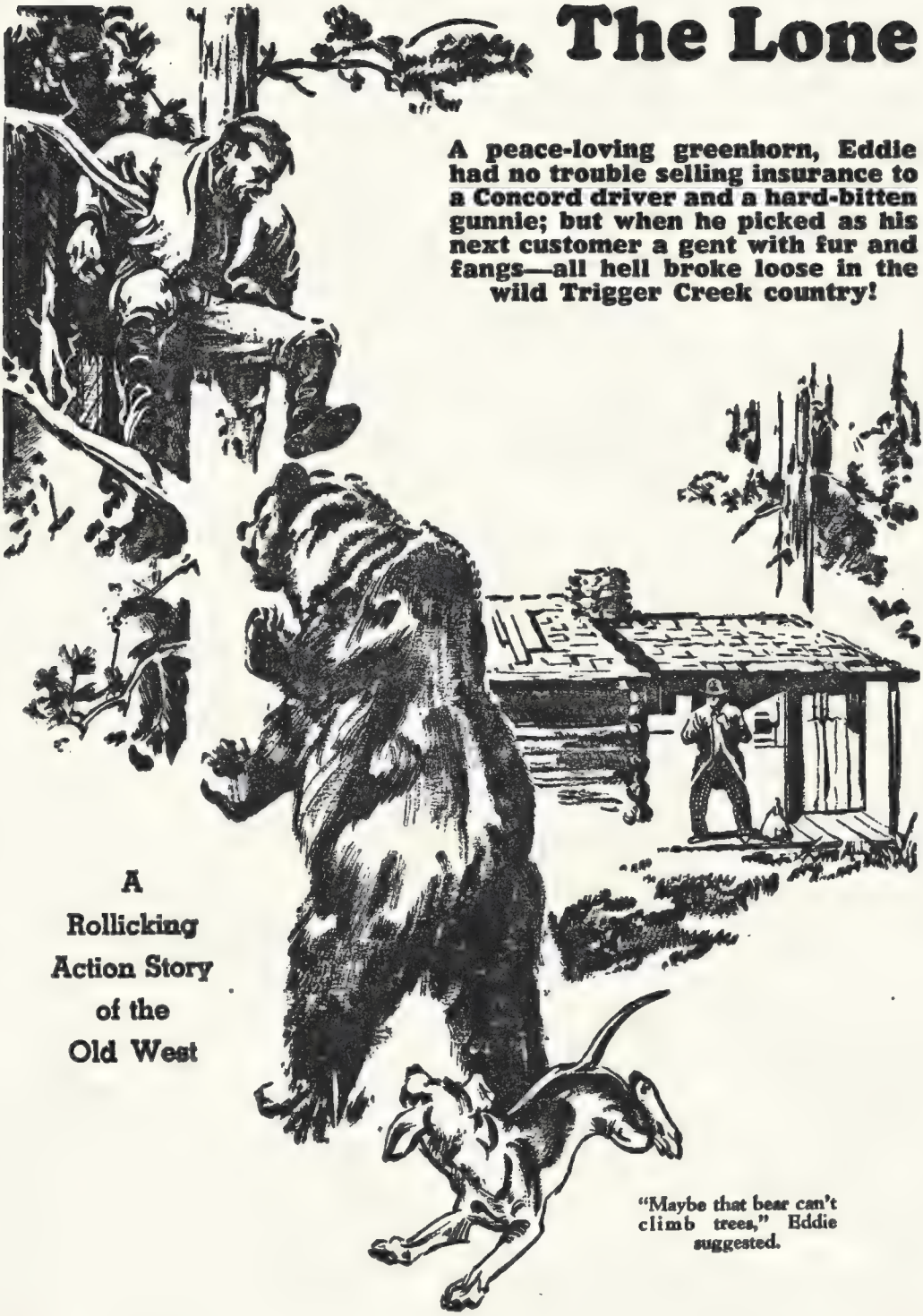
One by one the renegades attempted to fight their way out of the house; one by one they died under May's roaring rifle. Then several stormed out together and three managed to reach their horses and escape with part of the coveted loot. But not for long.....

4

Wounded though he was Boone led a posse in pursuit of the bandits, who were taken and hanged. The famous gun-guard justified his reputation of never losing a treasure-box, by bringing the stolen gold to its proper destination. Boone's adventures were manifold, but he lived long in spite of them, a true "trail-blazer" in the days when the West was wild.

The Lone

A peace-loving greenhorn, Eddie had no trouble selling insurance to a Concord driver and a hard-bitten gunnie; but when he picked as his next customer a gent with fur and fangs—all hell broke loose in the wild Trigger Creek country!



A Rollicking Action Story of the Old West

"Maybe that bear can't climb trees," Eddie suggested.

Wolf of Trigger Creek

By W. F. Bragg

BROTHER drummers, buckboarding it over the fenceless West, cruelly termed Omaha Eddie tight when the mild little salesman passed up their fraternal games of pinochle and poker. None knew that Eddie had hoarded his money because of a tender heart.

He loved a certain girl back home. For her he had forsaken the sedate life of a city clerk and adventured into Wyoming's sagebrush selling a general line of cigars, overalls, thousand-miler shirts, hard candy, and horse liniment. Dimes and dollars, thus hardly earned, went toward the cozy little home for two which was Eddie's fondest dream.

But lately, he had wondered dimly at the inconsistency of fair women. The girl wrote often of her love but, at the same time, spoke admiringly of the sales manager who was Eddie's boss. He was pictured as bold as brass, a man among men, quick on the trigger to close a deal; in short, a very lion of the selling profession.

Spurred by love's fever to prove himself no mouse, Eddie tied up with the Eagle Insurance Co., seeking prospects for life, accident, fire, theft, and storm insurance.

Eager as a bull pup worrying a range bull, Eddie sought business tips from the friendy agent at Three Rivers Junction while the latter loaded mail bags and express into the spring-wagon which covered the Star Route to Trigger Creek, a boom copper camp twenty miles up in the timbered Buckskins.

Running a speculative eye over the little sharp-featured man in hard round hat, plaid suit protected by a flapping linen duster, and tooth-pick pointed shoes, the agent ventured the opinion that selling insurance on this range was taking a tail hold on trouble.

"Life is short on Trigger Creek," he said. "Filled with sorrow, six-guns, delayed dynamite charges, and spoiled corned beef. Then there's kickin' mules, ornery bornes, avalanches, and high rivers. Last of all, there's the Lone Wolf." The agent cast a brown parcel bearing red blobs of sealing wax into a leather bag. "There," he said to himself, "might be a prospect."

"Who?" Eddie asked, remembering that the Eagle's book of instructions to agents bade them be alert, study all prospects carefully, then sign 'em up.

"Old Luke Suggs. He just about owns Trigger Creek. When copper boomed, he turned half his general store into the Miners' Bank to handle cash for pay rolls. He's gettin' a passel of cash today."

"He's likely too old for life insurance," Eddie objected.

"How about theft insurance for his new bank? Here's cash bein' sent, unprotected, over a dangerous twenty mile road. And when it gits there, no further protection beyond Luke's ol' buff'ler gun an' a sardine box safe. Looks to me like he'd be a jim dandy prospect."

"Thanks," said Eddie, and handed the agent a good five cent cigar.

When the spring wagon, drawn by four mules, trundled away from the junction toward the mountains, Eddie sat huddled in the rear seat, sniffing the odors from a large case of bacon which had been thrown aboard at the last moment. On the package of meat rested the locked bag containing Luke Suggs' packet of currency.

TWO silent men occupied the front seat. The bearded man who drove named himself to Eddie as Absalom Bower, proprietor of the Star Route and a tidy little livery stable layout in Trigger Creek. The lanky tobacco chewer on the left, who rested an eight square Sharps buffalo gun across his bony knees, was introduced as Dave Judd, finest snap-shot in the Rocky Mountains.

"Nobody can shoot swift enough or sartain," continued Absalom, "to put a shot in the cross for Dave. If this here Lone Wolf shows up today, he's a gone goslin'."

The Lone Wolf, it developed, had harried the roads into Trigger Creek since the boom had started to swell the miners' pockets with coin. Thus far, Dave's shooting ability had been Absalom's insurance against trouble with the bandit.

Conversation appearing to interfere with

Dave's tobacco chewing, he interrupted only once to assert that if he got the Lone Wolf under his sights he'd be two thousand dollars ahead.

"That's the reward on him," said Absalom. "Dead or alive. Put up by Luke's bank."

"I travel in insurance," said Eddie. He passed over cigars. "I'm informed that considerable money is being sent on this stage to Mr. Suggs. Perhaps he'd be interested in greater protection than Mr. Judd's gun."

"Whar would you get that?" growled Judd, deeply hurt. "Man an' boy, I've lived forty years in the West, dependin' for life most of the time on this old Sharps. I've been tore up by wild animals, red Injuns, bad hosses, wuss white men. Nine times outa ten, the ol' Sharps brings me through flyin'." Having exhausted himself, Judd spat, and gnawed off a bigger cud.

Eddie passed over fresh cigars. Vital spring breezes, from snow-capped peaks, filled him with a heady ambition. He'd show the girl back home that a mere sales manager couldn't hold a match to him. Here, before he tackled Luke Suggs, were prospects for the taking. Be alert, his thoughts ran, study prospects carefully, sign 'em up.

Before two more miles had passed, he had Dave Judd's signature to an application for accident insurance filed away in his brief case together with a ten dollar bill offered by Dave as a first premium payment in evidence of good faith.

Absalom Bower next fell, fascinated by Eddie's cigars and line of smooth talk. He had just filled his barn in Trigger Creek with wild hay, and bought a spare spring wagon. Five hundred dollars worth of fire insurance would satisfy Absalom.

Both men demurred at life insurance declaring they'd talk about that once they had passed the smoky haunts of the Lone Wolf.

"He's onsartain an' ornery as a bear comin' out of its den in spring," said Absalom. "He joshes folks he robs to beat hell. Seems to get a laugh outa other folks' trouble. But he won't get no laugh outa Dave Judd's gun. He'll git a bullet that runs eight to the pound."

Suddenly the wagon jolted to a stop. The lead mules, slowing to a stiff grade that pitched upward through a narrow pass in the Buckskins, had dug in their front feet at sight of a pine pole resting across the road. Fresh sap oozed from its axe-scarred butt.

"Look out!" cried Absalom, reaching for his whip.

Too late the driver raised the alarm. As Dave Judd flipped up his buffalo gun, a shot cracked from a clump of choke-cherry brush overlooking the road. Dave tumbled from the stage clutching his right arm. He lay in the dust, writhing, cursing.

A long howl echoed through the hills.

"You, Bower!" the assailant shouted, "You reach for ary gun an' you git wuss than I give Dave! Be smart. Hold up your mules while I hunt up old Suggs' money."

Shaking his head, Absalom wrapped the reins around the whip stalk. He put up his hands. He whispered to open-mouthed Eddie, as a masked man emerged from the brush, "Sit tight! He's got the jump on us!"

"But Dave! You said Dave was the best sort of insurance against bandits."

"Yeah. I was thinkin' it would only be an accident if one got him. Well, the accident's happened. "Absalom shook his head.

Then, as the bandit, trailing his spurs into the road, hesitated over helpless Dave, Absalom called urgently. "Don't hurt him any more, Lone Wolf. If you kill him, he's got no insurance comin'. But just bein' an accident thisaway, he gets ten bucks a week while he's laid up."

"Listen," stammered Eddie. "He ain't an accident case yet. I just wrote up his application."

"But you took ten bucks from him."

"To show evidence of good faith to the home office. If they don't approve the policy, they'll return the money to Judd."

Absalom, disregarding the outlaw, whirled in his seat, stuck his beard into Eddie's pale face while he roared, "I suppose you'll be sayin' next, you never put fire insurance on my property!"

"Yes. You just signed an application. There's other things to be done before it's accepted. Sizin' up the condition of your barn and vehicles—"

"But you took fifty dollars from me."

"Evidence of good faith!"

"Hell," bellowed Absalom, striving to clamber over the top of the seat to lay horny hands on Eddie's throat, "I never

heard the beat of sich a game! A man calls for chips but can't make a bet!"

THE rip of a bullet through the spring wagon, the angry command of the outlaw, halted Absalom's attack on Eddie.

"Whatever are you two prairie dogs chatterin' about?" asked the outlaw, now standing in the road alongside the spring wagon's rear seat.

Absalom told him. The Lone Wolf flung back his head, faced the afternoon sun, and raised harsh laughter. He wore a half mask of black sateen which hid his eyes and nose. He was tall, clean-shaven, and attired in the weekaday garb of miners and trappers of the Buckskins. A hundred like him inhabited these somber mountains.

"Well," said the Lone Wolf to Eddie, "I find it as much fun robbin' a stage as goin' to a minstrel show. Sellin' insurance, hey? Signed up Dave Judd for accidents. Then I shoot the sunuvagun in the arm! Tough luck, pard, but yuh can't blame me for laughin'." He backed away, accenting sharp commands with flourished rifle. "Heave out that mail bag. I wanta get Luke Suggs' money a whole lot."

"No money aboard today," Absalom said sourly.

"Don't feed me that, Absalom. I know. Otherwise I wouldn't have put in a half hour fellin' that tree right at the spot where I could hit Dave without runnin' ary risk."

His gun overcame Eddie's hesitancy. The bag was thrown out. The Lone Wolf sniffed as he slashed off the lock and thrust a long arm inside.

"Smells like bacon," he growled.

"Been laying on a case here," said Eddie.

Out came the Lone Wolf's hand, clutching the wax-sealed bundle which the agent had shown to Eddie.

"The wad," said the outlaw, and he gave another of his hoarse and frequent laughs. "I never waste time exceptin' when real dinero is involved. I never run no risks—" he paused, ran an eye over Eddie's rotund form. "Hey," he cried. "Maybe you better sign me up. I'm a good risk. Come outa there with that briefcase."

"No," pleaded Eddie, beads of cold sweat pearling his brow. "Nothing in it except business papers and such."

"Come out!" the Lone Wolf commanded. "Or I'll shoot you out!"

Under the gun's threat, Eddie stepped down gingerly into the road, brief-case clutched tightly. If the outlaw stole the cash deposited by Bower and Dave Eddie would have to make good. And that meant a big loss to the cozy nest egg.

Careless of love's tribulations, the Lone Wolf raked away the case, opened it, and stuffed the bills into his pocket. That done, he forced Eddie around and took away his wallet containing the little man's last dollar.

"By hell," said the Lone Wolf, "I can't figure why sports like you—whiskey drummers and the like—don't bring more cash into our country."

MADDENED, Eddie forgot the gun. He flung himself toward the Lone Wolf, fighting for his rights. And like too many small meek men who wage blind battle for such things, he was clubbed down into the dust by the stock of the outlaw's rifle.

"He ain't much of a drummer," Absalom growled. "He sells insurance. Most of that money you took was give to him fer policies by me and Dave."

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BALANCE STAFF AND ITS JEWELS

GOTHIC JARPROOF WATCH CORP., NEW YORK 19.

"See that he makes good on all bets," the Lone Wolf answered right cheerily while he examined Eddie's pad of applications. "Reminds me," the outlaw went on, "that I need some life insurance. I'll jest file an application. Bein' some modest about my name, I'll write 'er out for John Doe."

He signed the blank, stuffing the papers back into the case as Eddie tottered up. Dazed but still on the fight, the little man planted one awkward punch on the bandit's chin.

"Hellion for punishment, hey?" queried the Lone Wolf. "I'll show you a thing or two. You take a tail holt on trouble. Well, hang and rattle."

He ordered Absalom out of the wagon, bade him fetch pine needles and dry wood from the timber.

"Pile the stuff around the wagon wheels," he said.

"Whatever for?" asked Absalom.

"Get busy," snarled the Lone Wolf, tilting his gun.

"I still don't figure this play," said Absalom, scratching his head, after he had completed the job.

With a laugh, the Lone Wolf lit a match and tossed it into the tinder-dry needles. Fire ran up the sun-dried hickory wagon spokes. With a whoop of alarm, Absalom sprang to his mules. Sniffing the smoke, alarmed by the hiss of flames, the long-eared beasts were lunging in the traces.

"You're settin' fire to my hull outfit!" cried Absalom, hastily unhooking his leaders.

"What do you care?" the Lone Wolf laughed. "This drummer signed you up for five hundred dollars insurance. You can collect same as Dave. But yuh better git them mules clear. Papers didn't cover them!"

Eddie staggered up, pleading that Absalom and Dave had merely signed applications.

The Lone Wolf, leading a horse from the brush, tied mail bag and the brief-case behind the saddle.

"You got to make good on your bets in this country," he taunted. "You took money off'n Dave and Absalom. They expect somethin' in return."

"But you took that money away from me."

"I'm fair minded. If you think you can turn the trick, collect it off'n me."

His laughter echoed from the uncaring hills as he rode off into the timber.

AS EDDIE stood irresolute, that hoarse, mocking laughter still ringing in his ears, shaming him, he could hear up the road the curses of Absalom as the driver soothed his frightened mules. The spring-wagon had become a bonfire—black smoke and sparks shooting high into the air.

"I'll bet," Eddie whispered, "that comedian in the mask stopped on some high hill to watch and laugh."

He stood stripped of all his funds. Although Dave and Absalom might concede later that they had signed only applications, in their rage they would demand return of their cash. Men of this range, experienced hillmen, had failed to track the Lone Wolf. What then could one lone drummer do that they had neglected? But the girl back home had admired the sales manager for his brassy nerve in never flinching before tough prospects.

"He's the toughest I'll ever find," whispered Eddie. And inspired by love's fever, he settled his battered hat on his bullet head and plunged into the brush.

A high long yell, "Come back here, you varmint!" followed by the crack of a gun, sped Eddie on his way. That was Dave Judd's voice but the guard couldn't shoot straight because of his bullet-shattered wing. The big slug from the buffalo gun whined high over Eddie's hat as he plowed his way through entangling choke-cherry brush, through melting snowbanks in which he sank to his knees, and finally up rocky hills where the freezing wind cut like a knife through his thin garments.

He soon discovered that he possessed no pioneer's instinct for tracking. On the first lap of the trail, with broad daylight, a child could've trailed the outlaw, for he had ridden boldly, knowing the difficulty of concealing horse tracks in snow and mud.

But as night came on, this aid failed Eddie. He found himself milling about in the chilly darkness, a frightened little man in a cold and dangerous world. He dared not drop back into gloomy canyons where he could find wood for a fire. He feared that in such treacherous chasms, he would break his neck or leg, and die in these soli-

tudes with never the flowers or tears of his loved one to wet his grave.

A dawn that was red as blood found him high on a rocky divide overlooking a timbered mountain valley through which a small stream wandered. Dim pathways, trodden by elk and deer, led down to it. Eddie stumbled along one of these trails. As he proceeded, one dim thought stirred his hope. The Eagle's instructions to agents had advised a close study of all prospects. Well, he had certainly given the Lone Wolf a real close inspection despite the man's mask.

"If I ever come face to face with him," Eddie muttered, "I'll know him."

But here he walked alone and unarmed in the wilderness. If he overtook the outlaw, what could he do against the man's superior physical strength, his rifle?

So musing, Eddie staggered into a pine-shrouded clearing. A quarter mile down the stream he saw a cabin built on stilts to keep it dry underfoot when the stream went over its banks. Toward this shack Eddie made his way. Perhaps the mountaineer who lived there could give him some trace of the Lone Wolf.

As he rounded a sharp turn in the trail, a horseman confronted him. He was tall, lantern-jawed, and the eyes he turned on shivering Eddie were of a cold and slaty gray color.

"Where-ever did you come from?" gasped the astonished rider, surveying the little man's rumpled citified garments, the toothpick pointed shoes now cut to shreds of leather by sharp rocks.

Eddie told him. The mountaineer shook his head in sorrow.

"That Lone Wolf's a bad one," he comforted. "Menace to the hills. Come down to my place. I'll feed you."

Turning the horse, he piloted Eddie to the cabin. A bony, liver-colored hound ran out from beneath the building, long ears and tail waggling. He leaped up to meet his master as the rider dismounted. The latter promptly kicked him in the stomach. The hound made for the nearest timber, uttering pitiful yelps.

"Puttin' his muddy paws all over my shirt," growled Eddie's host. "Hate to kick Nero around like that. He's the best lion and bear dog in these hills. But he's always gittin' in my way."

OVER bacon and fried spuds, Eddie relaxed. He found himself practically telling the story of his life to the first sympathetic man, excepting the railroad agent, that he had found in the Buckskins.

"The Lone Wolf orter be hoss-whipped," growled the mountaineer. "Even a dog—even that damned hound, Nero—ort not be treated like he treated you." He selected a toothpick from the broom, leaned back in his chair. "So you're an insurance agent?" he asked.

Eddie explained that the Lone Wolf had run off with his case of application blanks and payments from Dave and Absalom.

"I'd like to help you out," said the mountaineer. "My name's Joe Dogan. I got an old pardner workin' this claim with me. One of us ties into it days, other nights. He's on night shift now. He's purty well fixed. You might nail him for some life insurance. If you got an advance payment off'n him, say fer ten thousand dollars wuth, maybe you could use it to square Dave and Absalom if they overtook yuh."

"I wouldn't make wrong use of company money," said Eddie. "But as long as I'm tied up here, I might as well look over any good prospects. After all, come hell or high water, business is business." He also selected a toothpick. He settled back in his chair, striving to appear jaunty and full of beans. This man had greeted him as a friend. Except for the cruelty to the hound, he had shaped up well to Eddie.

"When your pardner comes in," said Eddie, "I'll sure be glad to talk insurance to him."

Joe demurred. He must mount and ride to town for supplies. The partner might not appear for several hours. Often the drilling and setting of dynamite shots kept a man in the mine tunnel over regular working hours.

He led Eddie from the cabin, gestured toward a dark hole in the slope of the hill across the clearing.

"It ain't deep," he explained. "You'll find him inside, workin' on the face. I'll give you a miner's candle. When you get up close to him, just holler out. He'll turn and have a chat with you. Sorta cranky old fellow but he'll come right out with you when he sees you're all business."

As Eddie stumped across the clearing, carrying the miner's candle, Joe shouted a

cheery farewell. "I hope you sign him up."

The mine shaft was high enough for a short man to stand upright in. Guided by the candle's flickering light, Eddie pushed his way deeper into the bowels of the mountain. Water dripped from the glassy, black rock roof. There was a queer and musty smell. Bones and bits of hide littered the uneven floor.

This was a queer place in which to study a prospect. Counting his furtive paces, Eddie wondered just how the bold sales manager would proceed. If he signed up Joe's cranky old partner, it would be a feat worth recounting at the next convention of Eagle agents. His fame would ring throughout the western world.

He counted off thirty short steps. Something moved sluggishly at the end of the tunnel. Eddie halted. He thrust the candle forward. Its light dimly revealed a figure there, like that of a man clad in a ragged black fur coat. This shaft was dark and damp. Eddie shivered with the cold. He blamed no man for dressing well against the chill.

"How do you do, sir!" he shouted gaily in his top voice for prospects. "Your friend, Mister Joe Dogan, he said you might be interested in talking over some life insurance. If you can spare me a moment—

Joe Dogan's partner turned and cleared his throat. He lined a pair of piggish red eyes on Eddie.

"Pardon me," Eddie inquired politely. "What did you say?" And he took another step.

"Urggh!" answered Joe's partner.

IN THAT close space, the grunt sounded to Eddie like a bandsaw hitting a knot in a log. Horrified, he now saw that the partner possessed a red and slavering mouth decorated with long yellow fangs.

The partner reared and shook himself in his black fur coat. He took one lumbering step toward Eddie. The latter, rooted to the ground with fear, found his chilled legs suddenly alive with hot life.

"Bear!" he yelled, pivoting. "Bear!" and made for the tiny eye of light which was the tunnel entrance.

He turned so swiftly that he dropped the candle. He paused but a moment to reach for it. It eluded his groping fingers. The light went out.

"Urggh!" roared Joe Dogan's partner, much nearer this time.

Eddie believed he felt the beast's hot breath on the back of his neck. His desperate hand closed on a chunk of hide that lay on the floor, debris dragged into winter quarters by the bear.

With some dim idea of stuffing it into the beast's gaping jaws, Eddie seized the hide. He half whirled, found himself staring into the bear's red eyes. They looked as large to Eddie as a pair of switchmen's lanterns.

"Urggh!" arose that sawmill whine.

With a wild yell, Eddie clutched the hide to his breast. He scudded straight for the tunnel entrance. He lost his hat but delayed not to find it. At every long step he took, he sucked in a deep breath to relieve his tortured lungs. His heart hammered against his ribs. This then was the end of his insurance career. He'd die in this bear den under the rasping claws of a grizzly.

"Why did I ever quit selling plug tobacco and beans?" moaned Eddie.

"Urggh!" agreed the pursuing grizzly.

Unhooking his last notch of strength, Eddie popped from the tunnel like a shot from a gun. As he came out into the blessed morning sunshine, he saw Joe Dogan standing on a little knoll a few paces from the mine entrance.

"Help me!" cried Eddie. "There's a bear after me!"

At the little man's appeal, Joe flung back his head. The morning sun caught him squarely in the face as he laughed.

"A bear!" shouted Eddie, racing toward Joe. "Right after me!"

"Sign him up!" laughed Joe. "Sign him up!"

At this moment, the long-eared hound, Nero, emerged from nearby timber. He lumbered straight toward his master as the bear rolled from the tunnel. At sight of the beast, Nero began to bay. And true to his training, he raced toward the half-blinded beast.

Squatting on its haunches, the bear slapped the hound savagely, drawing a yelp of agony. Courage forgotten, Nero turned and raced toward the laughing Joe Dogan.

The bear, losing sight of Eddie, nose twitching as it picked up the hated odor of dog, pursued Nero.

"Hey!" bellowed Joe, and he kicked at the hound. "Git away from me!"

The ground was slippery. Joe flopped on his back. As he lay there, Nero leaped across his prostrate form. The bear followed after. One hind claw ripped off Joe's shirt.

Joe struggled to arise. But the yelping hound, circling about to elude the roaring grizzly, headed toward his master a second time.

With never a laugh now, yelling madly for Nero to get away, Joe made for the nearest tree. His shirt tail streamed in the morning sunlight. At his heels ran Nero. And at the hound's tail galloped the dingy bear.

FROM his safe perch on the cabin porch, the panting Eddie surveyed the race. He watched Joe go up the pine sapling, nimble as a red squirrel. But Joe discovered that the highest limb which would support his weight was not more than ten feet above the earth.

"Git my gun!" Joe pleaded. The bear, losing interest in the hound, was rearing up and reaching for Joe's dangling legs. "Git my gun and shoot this damn brute afore he gits me!"

"I'll shoot," said Eddie, "when you tell me where you hid that money you stole from the stage."

"You're crazy!" bellowed Joe.

"No!" Eddie insisted. "I found the mail bag inside that tunnel where you hid it."

"I didn't hide it there," Joe pleaded. "I hid it—" He drew up his quivering legs from the tickling claws, looked down into the grizzly's red eyes, wide open mouth. He surrendered. "The money's hid in the cabin under the bunk! Now—fer Gawd's sake—*shoot!*"

But Eddie laughed and turned on his heel.

"Not until I find that money," he said, and entered the cabin.

HE DISCOVERED the loot from the stage beneath the hay tick in the bunk. There was even his case with the payments taken from Dave and Absalom. As he turned, gun held ready, to go out and rescue Joe, he heard the crashing of rifles. Then sounded the whoops of men, the sawmill roaring of the enraged bear.

Eddie rushed from the cabin. He saw the half naked Joe flat on the earth with Nero, the hound, licking his face. A crashing in the timber marked the retreat of the bear.

Two horsemen, guns smoking, sat their saddles in front of the cabin. One was Absalom Bower. The other was a lean grizzled pioneer. He looked up at Eddie with astounded eyes.

"Whatever happened to Joe Dogan?" he asked. "Me an' Bower rode down here to git him to help us trail that damned Lone Wolf. I'm Suggs, head of the bank that lost the money."

"As representative of a leading insurance firm," said Eddie. "Perhaps I could interest you in some insurance against theft. The money stolen from your bank's in the cabin. And that's the Lone Wolf over there under the tree. Known to you as Mister Joe Dogan."

Later, after Suggs had squared up Eddie's deals with Dave and Absalom, the old man asked the little agent how he had felt certain that Joe was the bandit.

"We've decided that Joe hid the bag in the woods. The bear, which he knew had hibernated in the old tunnel, come out a week or so ago to forage around. That's the way they do. Pick up a few things to eat. Drag 'em into their den afore they go for good. Reckon the bear sniffed that bacon flavor on the mail bag and dragged it in. Joe knew about the bear but wasn't aimin' to kill it until its pelt haired out good and slick. But anybody mighta throwed that bag away. No proof that Joe did it." Suggs paused, then said. "If you can tell me how you did that, I'll sure insure the bank to the hilt with you."

"My instructions," Eddie grinned. "Agents are told to study prospects carefully. The Lone Wolf wore a half mask but when he opened his big mouth to laugh at me yesterday, the sun lit up two gold caps on his dog teeth. This morning, when I scampered out ahead of the bear, he opened his big mouth again to laugh, and the sun flashed off them same dog teeth. So I kept him up that tree. He'd be there yet—if the bear hadn't dragged him down—if you hadn't ridden up!"

"Hand me one of them applications," said Suggs. "And don't forget to remind me that you get the reward for closin' in on the Lone Wolf."

"Thanks," said Eddie. "Have a cigar on the company."

Lead in Their Teeth!

The rider threw himself from the saddle as the gray plunged over the gulley's tip.

By G. C. Ogle

Trapped between the deadly hoofs of stampeding longhorns and the greedy guns of Roach Madden, Wade Carson, two-bit rancher, made his greatest gamble—for the right to live and work and fight in freedom!

WADE CARSON headed up Bear Paw ridge in the gray dawn, straddling his roan pony. He was in a tearing hurry to get to his hounds, treed half-way up the ridge. For their deep-mouthed baying that came drifting down to his ears was irregularly spaced. It signified they were tiring.

Wade was sorry his hounds had treed so far from home. For Roach Madden's gunswifts were swooping down on every unguarded sheep flock in Sour Gourd valley. And they had a habit of striking soon after dawn.

But Wade had to go to his dogs. He couldn't let them bay until, worn out, they

quit for the first time. If repeated, it would soon become a habit, and good varmint dogs spoiled. If they'd treed the big black bear that had been slaughtering the settler's sheep, Wade considered the risk justifiable, although the bear's mangy summer hide would be worthless. Still, the twenty dollar County bounty would come in mighty handy.

The roan scrambled up a steep-pitched cow trail that led out of the valley, zigzagging through clumped blueblossom. Then Wade emerged onto Bear Paw's vast, grassy upland that swept away to the south in a succession of rolling ridges, separated by timbered canyons. Here Roach Madden was making his last stand.

At first the cattle king had been indifferent, scornful of the homesteaders settling in Sour Gourd Valley. He'd been sure they would starve out. So they would have, if they hadn't started raising sheep.

But as the sheep tide continued to flood in and encroach on his graze, Madden had roused from his somnolence and meted out his own brand of justice. It was high-handed. Might was right and sheep men were stinking pariahs who had to be run out of the valley for the good of society.

Wade was a sheep man. He was making an honest living with his flock. He supported his family and hoped to educate his kids. And he looked forward to retiring, comfortably fixed, some day.

Now the hounds' bellows came loud to Wade's ears. They were treed in a canyon perhaps a mile distant. So he put the roan to the lope and rode tall in saddle through browning stands of wild clover, cheat and mesquite grass. Rib grass thrust up its center stalk, powdered with frail white bloom, and sorrel was turning rusty red in the swales.

Wade's keen gray eyes swept across the valley below him, now coming awake. Pride lit his square, blocky face as he saw smoke threading up into the clear morning air from the shack nearest the foot of the ridge. For it was his own.

There were five more shacks in the distance. A week ago there had been eight. Now there were only charred ruins where three had stood, with their hopeful builders sleeping in narrow beds on Boot Hill. Roach Madden's gunnies had made sure of that.

Wade's jaws clenched tight and his eyes hardened in resolution. For he'd been a pall bearer at each of those nester funerals.

Soon he was staring down into the timbered gully at the big black bear, treed in a madrone a hundred yards away. He yelled encouragement, and the hounds redoubled their clamor.

Tying his roan, Wade slid into the arroyo, and worked his way down around the bend, with the hooked claws of blackberry vines and salmonberry brush tearing at him.

The sheep-killer was a big three hundred pounder. It stared down disinterestedly from its crotch in the madrone, lolling out its tongue like a dog. For its little red, piggish eyes couldn't yet distinguish Wade.

Then the bear's long, round black snout caught the feared man scent. He promptly began to back down the tree.

"Hold him, Duke!" Wade yelled. "Go get him, Tige!"

But it was Lady, who sprang high and fastened her teeth in the bear's rump. The bear huffed furiously and ground his jaws in rage. But he clambered back into the tree.

The black and tan bitch dropped back, to add her voice to the clamor. Up in his crotch again, the bear turned around and around, uneasily testing the tainted air. As Walt came nearer, the big bear clicked his teeth and huffed his windy, coughing rage.

Wade wasted no time. He took careful aim and drilled the bear through the brain, and the brute crashed to earth, dead.

Wade cut out the bear's heart and liver, sliced them into chunks, and threw them to the hounds. They guzzled the steaming tidbits, their chops dripping blood, as he skinned the bear.

Then Wade sensed that he was being watched by hostile eyes!

For the hounds, crouched down, wolfing their reward, were watching the bank above him unblinkingly. It could only mean that men were staring down at him. And no friendly hail came to his ears.

WADE realized with a sinking heart that Roach Madden and his gunnies had him penned in the arroyo. And the cattle king who ruthlessly ramrodded the Boxed Diamond spread had sworn mightily

that he'd personally slug butcher any nester who dared to set foot on Bear Paw's grass!

Every nerve in Wade's body screamed. But by sheer will power he resisted the impulse to go crashing on down the gulley. That would doom him. No man can outrun the death spewed by six-guns.

The slugs in his back would down him before he'd taken a dozen jumps. Roach and his crew would fan their hammers and ask why he acted suspicious later.

No, Wade's only hope was to out-fox Roach. On his knees, Wade swiveled around. He glanced up naturally as he tore the last of the hide from the bear's carcass with a short, ripping sound. The hounds still crunched away on the bear's heart, grinding down on its tough fibers until they could choke the lumps down.

It was Roach Madden who first claimed Wade's eye. The oldster with the frosty blue eyes dominated the scene. Big-limbed and heavy-bodied, he sat arrogantly on his blooded chestnut stallion.

Madden kinged it opulently on Bear Paw. His white mane fell to his shoulders over the velvet collar of his well cut, full-skirted black broadcloth coat, and his tan breeches ended in stamped Russian leather half boots. He wore silver plated spurs on them, and his Mexican saddle was heavy with stamped brass.

It became him. He wore the expensive clothes as casually as Dink Pretillen and Sandy Cobbit, his small, nondescript gunnies, wore their levis and calico shirts.

The three sat their ponies and stared down wordlessly, waiting for Wade's nerve to break.

Instead, he carelessly reached into his shirt pocket and took out the makings. He crimped the wheatstraw. Then he dribbled in the Bull Durham crumbs. He dragged the drawstring tight with his teeth before he licked the cylinder. Then he pasted it down.

Still Roach and his men sat wordless. Sandy Cobbit fidgeted, and Dink hunched his narrow shoulders as his breath whistled out in a windy sigh. But Roach sat his stallion as impassive as a wooden man, except for his knotting jaw muscles.

Wade thumbed a match into flame. He lit the quirlie and dragged luxuriously, letting the smoke jet bluely out of his nose.

Still Roach sat impassive

And still Wade's nerve refused to break. He'd utilize every second of time before the leaden storm broke. He knew it would come soon. But not before some choice pleasantries were flung in his teeth by the men who intended to slug butcher him.

Dink's breath whistled out again. He quivered:

"Why don't you say something, you stinking sheep herder?"

Wade had his feet under him now. He was hunkered down, balanced on his toes. He'd measured the distance to the madrone. He knew how his rifle was lying. And he was watching the three carefully. If he picked up the taunt, spun out the conversation, he might get a break. Once the three relaxed their vigilance, he'd make his play. So he grinned sourly:

"What do you want me to say? . . . that I love you and your dry-gulching boss because you've got me penned in this gulch?"

"Hur-hur-hur!" gloated Dink. "Yep, we have kinda got you at a disadvantage. But we'll skip the love and kisses."

"He's a stiff-necked son, ain't he?" grinned Sandy.

"But you're only a son!" sneered Wade scornfully. "A little, hired, useless gunnie who shoots honest men in the back!"

Sandy was close to foaming, as he made gobbling noises.

But Roach still sat impassive, his heavy maulie swinging close above his holstered .45.

"What the hell are you doing on Roach's property after you've been warned to stay off?" bellowed Dink.

"He has title, I presume?" drawled Wade. "And the right to order me off?"

Roach shed his impassiveness fast.

"I've got all the title I need to keep you off! Now! . . . For the last time: what the hell are you doing here?" he roared.

"I'm skinning the bear that's been killing my sheep . . . as anybody but a fool can see," replied Wade. "Anything else I can say?"

ROACH was leaning forward in saddle now, staring down with his frosty blue eyes. He seemed to swell with fury, rising in his stirrups. Dink jerked his head sideways lightning fast. He spat widely. Then his head jerked back. But it took his eyes time to focus again on Wade.

Sandy Cobbit was jittering again, his teeth chattering as he squirmed and twisted in saddle.

"Yes!" bellowed Roach, "Say your prayers you blasted sheep herder! . . . Let him have it, boys!"

Dink and Sandy shucked holstered iron. Their six-guns slammed a duet. But while their guns roared loud, they weren't particularly effective.

Roach's drag, though, was a blue blur, far faster than his two gunnies. Again his impassiveness washed away his sudden-displayed anger, as he threw aimed, hot lead down into the canyon.

The slugs from the .45 that bucked back against his palm probed for Wade's life as the sheepman whirled, grabbed his repeater by the barrel, and swung around the madrone.

A ricochet screeched off a boulder. It leaped up and came close to parting his black hair in the middle as it kicked his Stetson into the brush. As Roach emptied his cylinder, the three final slugs tore a slab from the madrone.

The booming reverberations of Dink's and Sandy's final shots crashed loud, even as Roach broke open his .45, stuffing it with fresh lead. Wade caught the click. On his knees, he swung sideways and loosed a snap shot and swung back, all in the same motion.

Dink glimpsed him. He threw furious steel into his gray's flank and came batting down the gully's lip with an empty gun!

Wade loosed aimed lead this time. Dink was partly concealed by the brushy screen he approached. He ducked down as the powder bloom pushed from the muzzle of Wade's repeater.

The slug tore up through the neck of Dink's bronc. The death-struck pony screamed, then reared high, gouting blood. His rider threw himself from the saddle as the gray plunged headlong over the gully's lip.

The bronc upended. His bright worn shoes glittered briefly and his black tail fanned out wide as he revolved in the air. Then he smashed down against the slope and went rolling on down through the brambles to wedge in the gulley's yellow clay bottom.

Dink vented a bawl of rage. He high-stilted on down the arroyo's lip, spewing awful curses from his sucking lips.

Wade's next slug tore through the blue-blossom stem with sufficient force to knock him down, for it struck the raging foreman on his belt buckle, cinched tight over his meager belly.

Dink collapsed. He sat there, doubled over forward, his arms clasped around his belly, gasping for breath. Then he re-stuffed his six-gun, thrust it forward through the bushes, and blindly triggered away the chambered slugs.

Sandy was still jittering. Madden stared at him scornfully, and sneered:

"Reputations ain't worth a dime to me . . . unless they're lived up to. Let's see you live up to yours . . . or do I have to go down and pull that blasted sheepherder out by the ears myself?"

The stung gunnie took the hint. He started peering down like a ferret, trying to spot Wade. And every time he moved now, Sandy threw close lead, keeping him pinned down.

Roach sat his stallion now with holstered iron. He stared at Dink and cursed sourly.

Dink wriggled back away from the canyon's lip until he could safely lever upright. He stared biliously at Sandy.

Sandy stared back, sneering: "No wonder the woolies are consumin' the land like Pharaoh's locusts. A foreman oughta have brains!"

"If yours are so steaming hot, maybe you can get me straddling leather again!" Dink stormed. "Who's hoofing it? . . . you, or me?"

Roach grunted: "Hold it! If brains was horse manure, the both of yours would be those dried out white ones we see rolling down sidehills after the first rains in the fall."

"I don't ketch," Dink said sullenly.

"Don't bother!" Roach sneered. "Just ketch that roan! Sheep men just naturally have an affinity for hoofing it. Once you're straddling it, I'll explain my plan."

Dink quickly straddled the roan, and reined close to Roach, who explained, taking care to pitch his voice loud enough so Wade could hear:

"Why should I take chances with my life? Hell! We'll just sashay on down into the valley and kill the lug's sheep and burn him out . . . put him plumb on the bum!"

"Boss," bellowed Dink, "you take the very words outta my mouth! We'll leave

him squatted here in the bushes, while we plumb ruin him."

"Why not?" Wade yelled furiously. "Let Roach Madden and his yellow-bellied gunnies tromple bravely down on the women and children! Be sure to ketch them unsuspecting like, so they won't be forted up with bows and arrows in their fists!"

But for once, Wade was glad that his wife and two younkers were away visiting, leaving him to batch.

Roach's mocking, jeering laughter belched out gustily. Then he touched spurs to the chestnut stallion and went rocketing off down the cow trail, followed by his two gunnies.

WADE clambered out of the gulch and headed for his homestead at a steady, dogged trot. His hounds slunk at his heels, their noses heedless of inviting bobcat and coon trails that were still fresh and often crossed the trail.

Wade left the trail, short-cutting down to the valley floor through a vast thicket that clung to the lower slopes of Bear Paw. He'd never entered the region before. For slinking about in its fastnesses was a herd of wild cattle, old mossy horn steers and renegades from the Boxed Diamond herd. It was said that some were more than fifteen years old, and that they'd never been rounded up since they were branded and marked when suckling calves.

Wade knew they sometimes attacked a man on foot. And it was whispered that Madden let them run there purposely, to keep the sheep flocks from crowding up the slope.

But it would save him a good three miles; and time was precious. He glimpsed an occasional cow brute flitting through the tangled fastness, and it struck him to wonder why Madden didn't get some decent sires and improve his stock.

He loped along fast, dodging through the brush. The sweat streamed from his face. The hounds crowded close behind him, their tails tucked in and their eyeballs rolling furtively. The hackles lifted on their necks as they growled deep in their throats.

But the engrossed Wade paid them no heed. Dropping down fast on the steep slope, he had to watch his step every second, lest a low-hanging limb or tripping vine throw him.

Wade burst out of the thicket. His homestead stood at the foot of the now open slope, barely a quarter of a mile away from him.

He strained his ears, hoping not to hear the crashing gunshots that would announce Madden's arrival ahead of him. He heard nothing but the pound of his own heart . . . and stealthy feet in the gloom behind him. A twig popped. It sounded as loud as a pistol shot to his sharpened ears, and the hounds rumbled defiance.

Wade's head swung around, with the breath whistling through his nostrils. He hardly knew what to expect. . .

But there was nothing! Nothing but the waving brush and silence!

Wade galloped a hundred yards down the slope before his head again instinctively swiveled around. And there before his unbelieving eyes was a herd of wild cattle emerging silently from the tangled fastness! There were at least fifty of the brutes, led by an enormous old lineback white bull! There were slinking, slab-sided cows with calves at their sides, on up to huge old mossyhorns with wide-spreading horns.

Wade halted. So did the herd. The old lineback pawed dust and sent his challenging herd call blaring out. The cows trotted forward at a gliding trot. Then they stopped, to stare suspiciously at Wade and test the air.

Wade had to make a quick decision. If he stood perfectly still the wild herd might ignore him, and vanish silently.

But if he ran they'd surely charge him. If he had wind in his belly he might barely make it to the clump of trees at the foot of the slope behind his shack.. The cattle would grant him a few seconds while they made up their collective minds to pursue him.

But he didn't have that wind in his belly! For the steady, slogging run down the mountain had burned it up!

Again Wade let his gaze swing down the mountain. And out there a half-mile to the right where the trail swung around a spur, a dust plume was feathering up beneath the pounding hooves of three hard-ridden ponies!

Roach Madden and his gunnies were calling on him! And he wasn't at home!

Wade gulped a deep lungful of air. Then he clamped his jaws and with held breath,

sprinted straight down the treeless slope!

A black three-year-old bull instantly took after him at a limber, gliding trot. A dozen cows did the same. Then the old lineback bull flung his blaring challenge wide, before dropping his head and breaking into an instant, thundering gallop!

The white monster roared down the slope like an avalanche. In short seconds he'd passed the black bull and the cows. The rest of the herd tailed off behind him, lunging down the slope. The pound of their hooves made the baked soil vibrate.

And still Wade sprinted madly down the slope toward his homestead! Roach Madden and his gunnies were just galloping into his yard.

They swung down leisurely from their lathered ponies. They were grinning widely, thinking they had things all their own way. For both Wade and the herd that pursued him had now dropped lower down the ridge, and were concealed by the clump of trees.

Now the old lineback bull was scant yards behind Wade! He was flanked by two limber-legged young bulls who galloped wide.

Wade covered another fifty yards. And it was still a hundred to the shelter of the trees beyond which Madden waited. Wade was sobbing for breath as he reeled along.

The white bull lowered his massive head to toss him.

Suddenly before him, Wade saw a deep hole that he'd been digging to tap an underground watercourse. With the last bit of his ebbing strength he ran a couple of steps more, then dropped breathlessly into the hole, as the herd swept past. He waited until the last hoof had thundered by.

AS Wade clambered out, the wild herd was surging through the clump of trees before his shack. There was a bedlam of wild yells and crashing gunfire. Cattle went down. But it would have taken more than three six-guns to have halted that living avalanche. It rolled over Madden and his gunnies.

Wade's roan galloped away. But Madden's chestnut stallion and Sandy's bay were dying on their feet, standing with spraddled legs and drooping head.

Dink Pretillen and Sandy Cobbit roosted in the limbs of a low tree like mink-startled fowl staring down fearfully. Roach Madden bellowed from the the shelter he'd found in an outhouse:

"Come on! Let's burn the scabby son out before he pops up and starts throwing lead at us from the bushes. And try to ketch his roan for me . . . Roach Madden ain't ever walked yet!"

"I ain't ketching nothing till them outlaw cows vamoose," Dink said sullenly. "If I hadn't been plumb agile that big white bull would sure a horned me. I betcha that sheepman—"

"Get down!" bellowed Roach. "Or do I have to shoot you outta that tree like a boy shoots a coon outta his paw's apple tree?"

Dink and Sandy slid sullenly down. The wild herd had vanished.

"Now! Fire them shacks!" commanded Roach.

The foreman sauntered up to a cock of cured hay in the yard. He picked up an armful and walked over to the shack . . . kicked open the back door and tossed the hay inside.

Wade, creeping fast down the slope, watched narrowly. If the foreman shucked his taw, he'd have to risk a long shot. But he wanted to get closer before he started burning powder for keeps.

Dink stared thoughtfully in at the hay. Then he sauntered back to the cock and picked up another armful. Wade breathed easier. He made a rush, now that the gunnies' backs were both turned, and gained the shelter of the clump of trees on the flat.

Again Dink approached the shack. This time he threw his hay on the porch. Sandy was moving toward the barn.

Dink dragged his .45 unconcernedly. The shack was sided with split shakes, tinder dry. The roof was the same.

Once that hay was set afire by the muzzle bloom of Dink's .45, the shack was doomed to burn to the ground in short minutes. No human power could save Wade's home. The fire would literally explode. It would burst up through the roof in a sheet of flame and race over it in seconds.

Dink extended his arm, standing sideways. Then he was kicking in death as Wade's sighted lead tore through his heart.

The sudden thunderclap back in the trees struck Sandy dumb. He stood there in the open space while Wade cranked in another shell. Then he started to run

toward the barn, only to whirl in indecision and dart back toward the little outhouse that sheltered Roach.

Then he was ploughing along on his belly in the stubble. His snub nose rooted up the dirt. He coughed, and battered the earth with his feet and died.

Roach started to boil out of the outhouse. Then he ducked back in before Wade's next shot smashed into the door.

Wade settled down grimly to wait. He was in no hurry. Roach couldn't get away. And the sheepman was a mighty patient man.

But he knew Roach wasn't. The cattle king had savvy . . . plenty. But he was a man who'd always got what he wanted by making his decision and then executing it ruthlessly.

Wade waited with the implacable patience of a hunting cougar, knowing the cattle king would make his play soon. He thought he had all the best of it. There was no way out for Roach, he thought.

But he was mistaken.

Roach tried taunting Wade for a while, blistering his ears with curses, and daring him to come out and shoot it out, man to man.

Wade only waited grimly. There was no time for talk.

There was silence for a time. The sun climbed high and hot.

Then the door that faced Wade burst open and Roach catapulted out and whirled behind the outhouse. Wade's quick slug tore splinters from the corner plank as the big man ducked around.

The little outhouse was built of heavy planks standing upright and was used as a smokehouse. Still, Wade didn't worry. He didn't see where Roach was any better off behind it than inside. He couldn't get away.

But the sharp-brained Roach had a reason!

While Wade watched, the big man upended the square building! Then, safely forted behind it, he began to roll it toward Wade. It came trundling along fast down the slope!

Wade threw angry lead . . . twice, three times! Then it suddenly dawned on him that he only had one lone cartridge remaining in his repeater!

It would have to pay off, or all his planning and paitient waiting would be in vain. He would be lying dead in his own yard with his sightless gaze flung up to the brassy sky while Roach fired his homestead and rode away in triumph, looking for new victims.

THE little planked square came bumping along until it butted up against the tree Wade sheltered behind. Only its four foot width separated the two men. And one of them had to die! There was no middle course!

Wade heard Madden's breath whistling in and out, and the urgent pound of his own heart. Now the cattleman had all the best of it. Not only would his six-gun be stuffed, but it was a far handier weapon in such close quarters.

Wade thought fast. He guessed Madden would creep to one end of the square, thrust the six-gun's barrel around the corner and loose quick lead.

But from which end would he fire first? If Wade knew—

He did know though, that the smokehouse had no floor. So that end of the square was open. If Madden tried to creep around there, Wade had a chance to glimpse him through the cracks in the single wall when he passed from the protection of the back one.

Madden would know that. So he'd attack from the other end, figuring that Wade was a sheepman and too dumb to do more than wait passively for the big cattleman's attack.

Wade was a patient man, used to waiting things out. But he knew there was also a time to attack. He heard Madden cautiously inching toward the square's covered end. Wade slipped hurriedly down to the other end.

Then, as Madden loosed powder and spun around on his knees fast, Wade's repeater came swinging around the corner like a pointer and centered on his brisket! The repeater roared . . . The cattleman spun around, rearing in the air.

With a convulsive, dying jerk Madden sent a slug zinging close past the sheepman's black poll. But the booming roar of Wade's last shell was the final sound he heard on this earth.

Boothill Quotes

By W. E. Golden

Dead men tell no tales—but a couple of scratches on the granite pile over a dead gunman's head could bring back those long-gone days of flaming glory!

NOWHERE in the bullet-punctuated, blazing six-gun history of the old wild West, was a more blood-thirsty chapter written than that carved by the smoke-hogs of the outlaws and bandits of the sixties.

Where one went death was sure to follow. Life was held against a hair-trigger, and their methods of flight to elude posses, mobs and sheriffs was a warning to those of the East that the West was no place for a tenderfoot.

Dead these long years—dead and forgotten—they lie in nameless graves whose tombstones might well have borne some such epitaphs as these:

John Wesley Hardin

A charmed life. But one day the dice fell sixes, and his back was turned. His blood trickled through the dust. . . .

Bill Longly

Ruthless pistolman, handsome deceiver, he was standing with a cigar in his mouth when they dropped him six feet at the end of a rope.

Ben Thompson

A fine saddle, a silk-lined hat. The sky was the limit. It took a plot and an army of killers to lay him flat in his polished boots.

Phil Coe

Splendid figure of manhood. Gracious, soft tongued, and loyal, he incurred the enmity of Bill Hickok.

King Fisher

Bengal chops, yellow hat, and dangerous triggers. A worthy friend. He went to San Antonio and they spattered his yellow hat with blood. . . . A pawn in the game too big and too fast.

John Selman

The fear of badman. Little talk and much gunpowder. He walked into the night, and El Paso streets roared with pistol fire. They found him on his back.

Jack Harris

His pleasure palace was built to take your money. A bullet caught him, and the heels of his boots hung on the stairs. But the show went on.

Juan Bideno

A Mexican with a blunt style of killing. He was eating beans and tried to draw from under the table. They said Mexicans didn't count.

Sheriff Jack Helms

His star glistened in the sunlight, but in the dark it went out. Cold fingers gripped a useless pistol. His buckskin vest turned crimson.

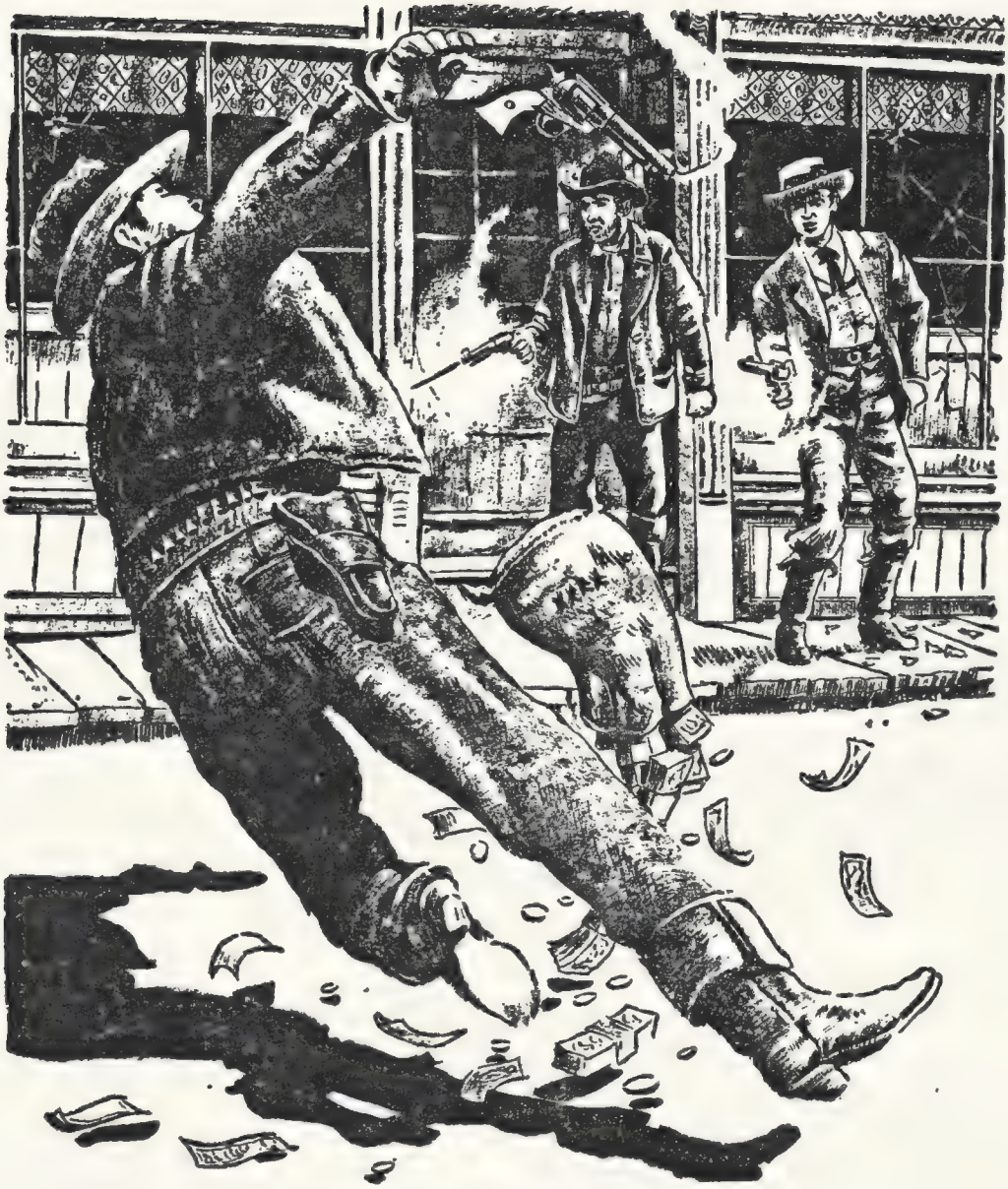
Jim Bradley

Arkansas gambler. His bluff was brief. Gaunt skeletons, the invisible populace of a ghost-town, rattle in and out. Bradley deals at midnight.

The last thing that these men saw was the flash of the gun that shoved them into eternity. The last thing they felt was the searing burn of a bullet boring into their vitals.

Before that, they had been raised and nourished on violence. Blood and death were their daily diet, and the snarl of guns filled their nights. But their real tombstones, for the most part, showed nothing of that. Those graves that were marked at all, bore only the simplest facts—their names, perhaps when they were born, when they died.

But there was one other line that may perhaps be more apt than anything else that could be written for them—"Rest in Peace."



Nick Schell went down first, dropping the bulging gunny sack.

Death for the kid he loved, or desertion of the law he was sworn to uphold—Sheriff Matt Sargent had to make his bitter choice. He solved it by abandoning his town to the mercies of the Spanish Springs renegade crew!

My Guest, the Killer!

By Gunnison Steele

WHEN I crossed Sentinel's dusty street and went into the sheriff's office, Nick Schell sat there with his boots on my old desk.

"Hello, Sheriff," he said, grinning a little.

I said, "You got a nerve! You come in to give yourself up?"

Nick scratched his side lazily, "I come in to talk some business with you."

"I got no kind of business with you," I said.

"That's what you think!" He was still grinning that sly, wicked grin. "Sheriff, me and my boys aim to rob your bank here in Sentinel at exactly three o'clock this afternoon."

"You're what?" I yelled, drawing my gun and putting it on him quick. "How you figure to get out of jail?"

Nick laughed. He was a slender, dark man.

"Put up the pop-gun, Sheriff," he said. "I won't be in jail. And you won't be in town. Pretty soon you'll get together a big posse and ride up about Spanish Springs on a rustler hunt."

I said sarcastically, "That'd empty the town and give you and your boys a chance to clean out the bank, wouldn't it? That'd be just dandy—if I done it, which I won't."

"You'll do it, all right."

From under the desk Nick Schell took a hat and laid it in front of me. It was a white hat, a boy's hat. When I looked at it I suddenly felt cold and dark inside. "Where'd you get it?" I asked.

"Now, where would you think? Off the head of a red-haired, freckled button named Pinto, that's where."

"Nick," I said, jabbing the gun at him, "if you hurt that boy there won't be enough left of you to make a skunk pie!"

"I told you to put up the gun," Nick said coldly. "He ain't been hurt . . . yet. But if you don't play ball with us I don't know what might happen to that brat of yours."

"He ain't mine—"

"I know all about it. He's Black Sam Abbot's kid. Black Sam was a rustler, and he had a little place over on Hungry Creek, up until the law caught up with him three years ago. Sam got took with lead-poisonin'. The kid bein' alone then, his Maw having died two years before, you took him home with you. Eleven now, ain't he? I hear he thinks a lot of you, more than he ever did of his daddy. I wonder what he'd think if he knew it was you, Sheriff Matt Sargent, that'd killed his daddy?"

I was quiet a moment, hating Nick Schell and wanting to kill him. He had things right. I couldn't have thought more of my own kid, if I'd had one, than I did Pinto Abbot. To Pinto, being sheriff was almost like being God. A lawman's badge was the most beautiful thing in the world to the kid.

Killing Sam Abbot had been forced on me. But that didn't change what I knew was true: I owed his son a mighty big debt. Pinto had gone out riding on his palomino a couple of hours ago. And now Nick Schell's bad bunch had him.

"Where's the button now?" I asked.

Nick gestured broadly toward the high Antelope Hills, which rose quick and dark behind Sentinel. I knew he had a hide-out somewhere up there in the rough country.

"What if I do like you say?"

"Then we'll turn the kid loose, safe and sound." He got to his feet. "Three o'clock," he said, and walked out.

I DIDN'T try to stop him. I watched him climb onto a wiry buckskin and ride slowly out of town, a kind of arrogant scorn in his black eyes as he looked back over his shoulder. I felt kind of numb inside.

He knew he had me caught, and I knew it too. I had to choose between the badge I wore and an eleven-year-old kid who thought all sheriffs were great men. Nick Schell was pretty sure what my decision would be; maybe I was, too, but I wouldn't admit it.

I got up and went out onto the street. It was past noon, but I wasn't hungry. I felt like I never would be hungry again. Pinto didn't know his daddy had been a rustler; he thought Sam Abbot had died fighting on the side of the law.

After a while I went back to my office and just sat there. Through a window I could see the Antelopes, dark and hostile, rising against the sky. Somewhere up there Nick Schell and his bunch had a hide-out, but I'd never been able to find it. Pinto was up there now, somewhere among those dark timbered slopes and wind-swept ridges, a prisoner. He maybe didn't know it was up to me to decide whether he lived or died.

Nick hadn't said what would happen if I gathered a posse and headed into the hills to try to rescue the button. But I knew. There wasn't any foolishness or bluff about Nick.

At half-past two I got up, went out and crossed the street to the Mountain House saloon, knowing that my mind had been made up from the first. It was a slack time of day and there were only four or five men in the place.

"I hear rustlers made a raid up close to Spanish Springs last night," I said, singling out Jim Raines. "I'll need a posse. Jim, will you get about a dozen of the boys together? And be ready to ride in fifteen minutes."

Jim nodded, and I went out. A dozen men would be just about all the able-bodied ones in town.

At the end of fifteen minutes we rode out of Sentinel. There was a great deal of talk and laughter among the possemen. To them it was a lark, something to break the monotony. They couldn't feel or see the heavy darkness inside me.

As if drawn by a magnet, my gaze kept lifting to the dark spires and ridges of the Antelopes. And finally, as I rode along, I took the binoculars from my saddlebag and held them to my eyes. A long time I studied the slopes, some of them timbered, some bare and desolate.

The hills seemed to be frowning, as if in disapproval. I called a halt, and said, "Maybe this raid at Spanish Springs was a fake. Maybe it was ment to draw us out of town, so Nick Schell could raid the town."

"By gosh, I bet you're right!" Jim Raines said. "Smells fishy to me."

"Won't hurt to make sure," I said, and whirled my horse and spurred back toward Sentinel, followed by the others.

We caught Nick Schell and his four partners cold, just coming out of the bank with the loot. They were so surprised that for a moment they just stood there, mouths gaping open. Then they grabbed for their guns.

We jumped off our horses and scattered to doorways and windows. Sentinel seemed to explode in a red burst of fury. We'd waited for this chance a long time.

Nick Schell went down first, not dead but hurt bad, and dropped the bulging gunny-sack he was carrying. Its mouth came open and banknotes fluttered like green leaves along the street.

The fight didn't last more than a minute. Then the raiders, with Nick out of the fight, quit cold. Pretty soon I had them locked in a cell.

IT WAS just about then when Pinto Abbot came tearing along the street on his palomino. He was bare-headed and there was a bruise on one side of his freckled face. He seemed mighty disappointed when he found out the fight was already over.

"I knew what Nick Schell had told you to do," he said, when we were alone in my office a while later. "I knew you'd be too busy fightin' them owlhooters when they tried to rob the bank, to bother with me, so it was up to me to get loose. When they left for Sentinel they left a guard."

"Pinto," I said, "what made you figure I wouldn't head out for Spanish Springs with that posse, like Nick told me?"

He looked at me kind of queer, half grining. "You jokin', Uncle Matt? Sheriffs just don't do things like that. Well, it seemed like I never would get a chance to conk that guard behind the ear with a rock. But I finally did. It was a slick trick, Uncle Matt, pretendin' to head out for Spanish Springs, then circlin' back."

I was quiet a moment, knowing that I never would tell Pinto Abbot the truth that, heading fast for Spanish Springs, through my binoculars I had seen him riding wild and free along a spiny ridge in a race for the lowlands.

★ .44 TALK ★

EVERY so often, in going through our mail bag, we run across a letter from a real old timer, a gent who has been to the places that most of us know only through the pages of books and magazines; and who has seen sights that most of us can only imagine. We received a letter like that from Mr. George W. Bolds, and we thought so much of it that we'd like to pass it on to you.

Take it, George:

I'VE READ so many articles that were factual or supposed to be that I'm much confused. One in particular was written by a publisher of some magazine out west.

That writer described old Adobe Walls when it was first built down in the Texas Panhandle. He tried to describe the fight at Adobe Walls between the defenders and about one thousand Comanche, Kiowa, and Cheyenne Indians. Then he spoiled it all.

He mentioned that after the hunters defeated the Indians, the place was abandoned and the hunters returned to Dodge City, and not Fort Dodge stating at the same time that "there was no Fort Dodge".

I personally knew about half of the defenders of Adobe Walls. It was June 1872 when the Indians attacked the buffalo hunters who were forted up in the Adobe houses. There were twenty eight buffalo hunters and one woman, Hannah Olds.

The Indians made their attack suddenly in the morning, killing two men who were sleeping outside in their wagon. The siege lasted more than two days. On the morning of the second day of the siege Billy Olds started to another building and was shot down by the Indians as he stepped out the door.

The hunters pulled him back in and closed and barred the door. Billy was dead. They laid him in a corner out of the way and spread a blanket over him. Bat Masterson told me, "Hannah Olds looked wild, but said nothing for a while. Then she pulled out some boxes and broke them and began to sort out ammunition."

She loaded guns and cleaned them for the defenders, and when not busy at that, supplied food for them. On the morning of the last day of the siege Billy Dixon killed an Indian chief near a half-mile away while they were in parley. This long shot discouraged the Indians, especially as they had already lost about half their warriors and ponies, and they left.

My information about this siege was given me by the men who were there—great frontiersmen like Andrew Johnson, Bat Masterson, Billy Dixon, Dutch Henry, and others. The statement that there was no Fort Dodge shows that the magazine writer's information was taken from stories, and the actual deeds were done many years before he was born.

Fort Dodge was built in 1863, to protect traffic over the Santa Fe Trail from hostile Indian attacks. It was abandoned in 1882, and in 1889 became the Kansas Soldier's home.

Well, that's it. There aren't many men like Mr. Bolds still around. Most of them have gone to a quieter place where they can sit around for all eternity and swap yarns about the good old days.

Those of us who have come since have known our share of violence, but it has been a different sort—the impersonal violence of bomber, howitzer and the rapid-fire machine gun. But the days when two men could get up and go at each other with sixgun and Bowie knife are gone.

Yes, the old West was filled with plenty of hell, all right, but who wouldn't swap that "peaceful" hell for today's brand—the sportsmanship and even the chivalry of those days for the mass murder of these? And who wouldn't take even the most ruthless gun-slamming killer in preference to men like the late, unlamented Hitler and Mussolini?

Those of us who get a kick out of reading of the old frontier know the answer to life in the present age. We live in the present—and through the pages of *.44 Western,* we live in the past, too.

The next issue will be published June 19th!

—THE EDITOR

With Death

An Action-Packed Frontier Novelette

By Joseph Chadwick

CHAPTER ONE

Iron Safes, Hot Lead, and Gold!

THE trail herd grew smaller each mile along the American, but whenever he left a mining camp behind Jeff Random's poke was heavier. The jingling music of the poke's contents—fifty-dollars gold slugs—was proof that there were more ways than one of finding a bonanza. And for a Texan, cattle handling was better than grubbing in the earth or panning mountain streams. It had taken five years to gather the herd, but the wearying toil had been a labor of love. And the golden harvest was good.

By the middle of February—the year

Behind, and Hell Ahead!

Death laid a barricade of hot lead before them; and behind them rode the stark news that would bring desolation and ruin to a teeming bonanza empire . . . While Jeff Random, cowman without a ranch, ran his madman's race for gold or a grave—sided by a frontier girl, who was bringing him ever closer to hell!

Jeff flung the door open and stepped into the small office—pistol in hand.

being '55—Jeff disposed of his last steer to a red-bearded miner at Mormon Bar, beyond Placerville. The miner, named Hanley, watched Jeff hand-weigh his bulging leather pouch, and guessed, "Should tip the scales at forty pounds, eh?"

"Should, at that," Jeff said. "More'n twelve thousand dollars."

"Too much to tote around, friend."

"Too much to cache, on the other hand."

"Were I you," said Hanley, "I'd head straight for Placerville and turn it over to Adams & Co. for safekeeping. That's where I cache my paydirt. It ain't safe in Californy nowadays for a man to carry a poke. Me, I was held up and robbed not more'n three months back."

Jeff said, "I'm not stopping there."

"Adams & Co. has offices everywhere," Hanley said, in a genuine desire to advise a younger and less experienced man. "You can hand the Placerville agent your poke, take his certificate of deposit and cash it in at Sacramento or Frisco or wherever you light. Or you can trust it to the agent at Wells Fargo."

Jeff had wrapped his heavy poke in his blanket bedroll and now tied it securely to the cantle of his dun's saddle. His movements were slow and deliberate, his air that of a man who knows exactly what he is about. The bedroll and its precious contents secure, he said, "Don't trust any banking outfit."

"Adams, Wells Fargo, Page Bacon—they're all sound as a dollar."

"Trust myself more."

"A bedroll ain't an iron safe."

Jeff Random gathered up the dun's reins. He gave the miner a grin. "You trust to iron, friend, and I'll trust to lead," he said, and patted the holstered weapon at his thigh. "This here's a Walker Colt. Used it in the Mexican War, back in '48, when I rode with General Zach Taylor. It'll hold off any robbers that come my way."

He swung to the saddle, then waved toward the steer which now was grazing at the end of a picket rope. "Fatten up that critter, friend, and you'll eat good beef. Adios."

He turned the dun, and rode off at an easy lope.

TWO days later, Jeff rode into Sacramento just after the bustling town had been drenched by a heavy rain. The streets were a bog, running with water and oozing mud. The luck that had ridden down from Mormon Bar with Jeff, and kept him from meeting up with robbers, had seen that the flash storm missed him. He rode in, dust-dry inside and out, looking for a place to buy a meal and a drink. But he came instead upon a distracting sight.

On the plank sidewalk before the Orleans Hotel, a girl with golden hair—Jeff Random kept thinking in terms of bright metal—stood with skirts held ankle high as she contemplated with annoyance the quagmire that at the moment served as a street. Her nice face was slightly marred by a frown. She stamped a small angry foot. Her lips moved, to utter, Jeff suspected, some unladylike exclamation of irritation. She was, he decided, as pretty as a newly minted coin.

Any number of men were passing by, but none offered to help the girl make her crossing. They gave her admiring glances but kept on their way. On impulse, Jeff swung his mount over and reined in by the girl. He touched his broad-brimmed plainsman's hat.

"Ma'am, Pete and I'd sure like to ferry you over this bog," he ventured. "We'd get you yonder without mud touching the hem of your dress."

Blue eyes, as clear as Lake Tahoe, gazed up at him.

"Pete and you?"

"Pete's my horse, ma'am."

The girl smiled at the dun. "Glad to know you Pete," she said.

Jeff leaned down, encircled a slim waist with his arm, and lifted. The girl squealed a little, prettily, as she came to rest against Jeff's right thigh. She took quick hold on the saddle horn, clung a little breathlessly. "You won't drop me?" she gasped.

"I'd sooner drop myself," said Jeff Random, and didn't realize that he was being gallant.

Once across the muck, he lowered her to the plank walk. He dismounted and walked beside her, leading the dun gelding. "Name's Jeff Random," he told her. "I'm a cattleman."

"My name is Maria Foster."

"This town your home?"

"No; we're passing through. My family and I," Marie Foster said. "There are three of us. My step-father, Doctor Bolton, and my step-brother, Steve. My mother—" Her voice faltered a little. "My mother died six months ago, back in Missouri."

There was nothing Jeff could say to that, for he could tell that the girl was suddenly saddened. He wanted to know more about her, for in some strange way Maria Foster had become important to him. He did not want her to remain a stranger. A quick glance showed him that she was watching him, shyly but with much interest, and he wished that he had had time to slick up before meeting her. He was clad in trail clothes, boots and butternut jeans and a fringed buckskin jacket. His hair needed trimming and a stubble of beard cried for a razor.

He said, "Just got into town. Should get duded up."

Maria Foster smiled, politely.

"I'd sure like to meet your folks," he ventured. "Though I don't have much time for doctor-gents. Back in the Mex War, a locoed surgeon wanted to take off my left leg just because I'd stopped a musket ball. He would've, too, only I showed him the business end of my Colt. My leg got curved all right, too."

"You were a soldier?" the girl said. "You must meet my step-father. He was in the War, with the Missouri Volunteers. You and he would have a lot to talk about." She laughed softly. "And I won't let him give you any pills!"

So Jeff had an excuse not to leave her. They came to a yard between two buildings, and here, in a faded and much patched tent, Dr. Bolton was seeing patients. A man with an arm in a sling emerged from the tent, and another man entered it. A third man and two women awaited their turns. Beyond was another tent, which was the girl's. A canvas-covered wagon stood off to one side, and it bore a large red-lettered sign that read, "Doc Bolton's Excelsior Remedies."

"Pa's busy," Maria said, "but he'll be finished with his patients by supper-time." She gave Jeff a shy look. "Maybe you'd stay."

"Why, sure. Thank you, ma'am."

Jeff didn't know why he felt so pleased with himself.

HE CHOPPED wood, built a fire, fetched a pail of water for the kettle. He brought the cornmeal and the bacon from the wagon, then perched on the wagon tongue to smoke his pipe and watch Maria prepare the meal. He began to understand why he felt so pleased. In the past five years, he'd known only honkytonk girls, and a man could find no lasting pleasure in the companionship of such women. But Maria Foster reminded him of home, of his mother and his two sisters. Busy with her cooking, she seemed to be his sort. One day she would grace a man's house or cabin. Jeff wondered what that man would have to be like. Suddenly he was telling her of his plans, about the ranch he meant to buy and stock with the poke he had hidden in his bedroll.

"And I'll build an adobe ranchhouse," he told her. "It'll have a kitchen and a parlor—not just one room."

Maria's face was flushed from the warmth of the fire. "That'll be wonderful. But won't it be too big for a man living by himself?"

"Won't live alone," Jeff said. "I mean to find a wife."

"Oh?"

"But maybe," he said, looking squarely at her, "a girl wouldn't like ranch-life. Too lonely."

He waited for her reply, but before Maria could speak Doc Bolton appeared. He was a pudgy little man with a round pink face. He wore a long black coat which hung open to reveal a flowered vest and a ruffled shirt front. A beaver hat was perched at a jaunty angle on his gray head. His eyes were a baby blue, and his broad face beamed as Maria introduced him to Jeff Random. He gave Jeff's hand a vigorous shake, then slapped him on the back when the girl said that Jeff had been a soldier in the Mexican War like himself.

"With the Missouri Volunteers, myself," he said loudly. "No better soldiers, anywhere—excepting maybe the Texans. Daughter, what are we having for supper? We old soldiers are as hungry as bears!"

The three of them ate together, but Doc Bolton did all the talking. Jeff found him to be a great talker, a man who loved an audience. But occasionally the medico would ask a blunt question, nodding sagely when Jeff told him about his cattle drive and how quickly the herd had been sold at the mining camps. "Money in cattle," he said. "Folks always buy beef." And he plunged into a lengthy monologue about the taste and flavor of beef as compared with venison or a buffalo steak or even antelope meat.

Jeff listened with but half his attention. He was watching Maria Foster. He came to the conclusion that with her step-father about, the girl would be hard to court. He was right. As it grew dark and she washed up the supper things, Doc Bolton said, "After a meal, a small drink aids digestion. Come along, son. We'll find a cozy tavern."

And Jeff couldn't refuse the invitation from Maria's step-father.

CHAPTER TWO

"I've Come For My Poke!"

DOC BOLTON led the way to a grubby saloon on a dark side street, and Jeff tied his dun to the hitch rail. The fat man watched him remove the bedroll and fashion its rawhide rope into a shoulder sling. "No need to bring your blankets, Jeff, m'boy. We'll only be inside a half hour."

Jeff slung the bedroll from his left shoulder, and said, "Got a poke here, sir. Aim to keep it with me, everywhere I go."

They walked into the dingy saloon, which had a bar the length of one side and some rough-board tables and chairs along the other. A dozen men were at the bar and a couple of others sat at a corner table with a dark-skinned girl who wore a startling red dress. Doc Bolton selected a table and called out, "Some of your best, Duval," to the man behind the bar.

Seated, Jeff placed his bedroll on the floor between his booted feet. The saloonman brought a small jug and two glasses, and took in exchange a gold coin that came from Doc Bolton's pocket. The medico asked, "My son been around this evening, Duval?"

By name and accent Duval was a Frenchman. He said he hadn't seen the doctor's son. "Busy, that son of mine," Doc Bolton told Jeff. "He means to make his pile, here in Californy. He's like you, my friend—a man to make hay while the sun shines. Well, bottoms up!"

Jeff downed a drink of the raw green whiskey. Doc Bolton downed a second and a third drink, but Jeff decided he would go easy on the rotgut. With so big a poke to guard, he dared not risk drinking too much. He sat and listened to Doc Bolton talk and talk, and finally the medico said, "Here's Steve now! Hi, Son—come here!"

Steve Bolton was a young edition of the medico—short, stocky, blue-eyed, ruddy of complexion. He too had a flair for fancy dress, and was dapper in tight-fitting breeches and a long brown coat. He had entered the saloon with two companions, and now the three came forward. There were introductions, handshakes. Steve's lean, swarthy-skinned companion was Peruvian Jack. The burly man with the rocklike face and muddy eyes was Sam Burgard. The newscomers pulled up chairs and seated themselves.

Doc Bolton said, "Jeff, here, is a cattleman."

"Cows?" said Steve Bolton, with distaste.

"Money in cattle," his father said. "Miners'll buy beef."

Peruvian Jack's dark eyes glinted. "*Senor* sells cattle for beeg money?" And Sam Burgard muttered, "Takes a lot of work. More money in panning gold. What're we drinking, Doc?"

Doc Bolton said that the jug held whiskey. "But our Texan friend seems not to like it." He stood up and lifted the jug. "I'll see if Duval's got some imported brandy."

He went off to the bar where he and the saloonkeeper fell into some sort of low-voiced argument. Finally Doc Bolton returned and explained that Duval was a miser with his good stock. "But he'll let us have half a bottle of Napoleon brandy. An old Legionnaire, Duval. . . . Campaigned all over Europe with Bonaparte."

Duval arrived with the brandy already poured into mugs. He placed a mug before each man, then moved off with his empty tray. Doc Bolton said, "Here's to friendship, gentlemen." Five mugs were lifted, and the toast was drunk. Jeff Random found that the brandy went down much easier than the rotgut whiskey. He took another drink from his mug.

There was talk, Doc Bolton doing most of it. Peruvian Jack sat lost in thought, dark eyes roving. There was an ugly knife scar across his left cheek. Sam Burgard drained his mug and smacked his thick lips, and his yellowish eyes asked for more. Steve Bolton lighted a cheroot. . . . Jeff Random tried to hide a yawn. He was growing sleepy. He was growing very sleepy, listening to Doc Bolton's rumbling voice. It was stuffy in the Frenchman's saloon, and Jeff began to sweat.

"Doc, you're a great talked," Jeff finally said, "but I'm too sleepy to listen. I aim to find a place to bed down."

"Why, sure," the doctor said. "Why not spend the night at our camp? I take it, a Texas buckaroo wouldn't want to hole up in a hotel room. Sleep under the stars . . . healthful."

JEFF nodded. He thought drowsily that he might as well spend another night outdoors. Besides, he would be near Maria Foster. In the morning, she might invite him to breakfast. . . . He rose with Doc Bolton, started for the door. Then he remembered his bedroll, and returned for it. It seemed somehow heavier than before, and once it was slung from his shoulder it all but pulled him off balance. *Not so much sleepy,* he told himself, *as too much to drink.*

Outside, he fumblingly untied his horse. He lead the dun as he walked along the dark and narrow street with his fat friend. He took slow and careful steps, for his legs had a numb feeling. He wondered if Doc Bolton felt as dizzy as he did. "How much farther, Doc?" he asked, finally.

"We've arrived," Doc said. "Here's the place."

Dimly, Jeff saw that it was so. He could see the vague shapes of the two tents and the wagon. He also saw, but too late, two figures loom from behind him. A blow was struck. Pain shot through Jeff's head. He tried to get hold of his Walker Colt, but a second blow drove him to his knees. His numbness was complete now, and he sank down until he was flat on his face. He felt no more pain.

Once, in Frisco, Jeff Random had met a man who had been drugged in a deadfall and, on staggering to the street, had been set upon and robbed. Now, wakening by the sun on his face, Jeff knew how helpless a drugged drink could make a man. He had no doubt at all—that brandy had been fixed by fat Doc Bolton and the saloonkeeper, Duval. And the two men who had attacked him had been Peruvian Jack and the hardcased Sam Burgard. It was likely that young Steve Bolton had been in the background, directing the robbery.

Jeff did not need to search for his poke. Nor did he need to look about to find the yard between the two frame buildings empty of tents and wagons. Doc Bolton, the three sharpers, and the girl must have pulled out as soon as they got their hands on his heavy leather pouch.

What Jeff did look for was his horse. Pete was there, nibbling on what scant grass grew in the clearing. He took stock of himself, next. After being beaten down, he had been carried into the yard and rolled in his blankets. He found his wide-brimmed hat on the ground, and his Colt pistol was safe in its holster. He searched in his pockets and found that he had not been relieved of some thirty dollars in gold and silver. He felt like cursing, but groaned instead. His head still ached.

After saddling the dun, and gathering up his blankets and his hat, Jeff sought a watering trough in the street. He ducked his head, and the shock of the cool water cleared his mind of cobwebs. He watered his horse. Next, he sought some grain for Pete and a meal for himself. By the time he had eaten, his head felt much better. But his anger had increased. Too late, Jeff wished he had heeded the advice of that miner at Mormon's Bar and placed his poke with Adams & Co. for safekeeping. The fruits of five years' hard work, gone in a night. . . . Jeff was as bitter as he was angry. And he blamed himself. He should have known better, he told himself, than to let himself be baited by a pretty face.

He wasted no time in searching about Sacramento. He rode to the edge of town and made his inquiries. At the waterfront, he learned that no river boats had departed during the night or yet that morning. He met a string of freight wagons coming up the Frisco road, and learned from the drivers that they had passed no canvas-topped wagon such as he described. But later, on the Placerville road, he met a prospector with a pack mule who told him that he had seen Doc Bolton's rig. "It's stalled about three miles yonder," the prospector said. "Got a broken rear axle."

Jeff said, "Obliged to you," and rode on.

It was no more than three miles. When Jeff rode up, he found the weather-beaten wagon pulled off the road with its rear wheels crazily aslant. Doc Bolton sat on a rock, glumly eying the broken axle. The wagon had two crowbait horses in harness, but there was an extra horse. This third animal was a fine-looking pinto mare, and the girl, Maria Foster, was saddling it. She looked quite different from the girl over whom Jeff had lost his head. Today she was clad in mannish clothes instead of billowy shirt and cloak. She wore butternut jeans tucked into spurred boots, a heavy homespun man's coat, and a hat

almost as wide-brimmed as Jeff's own. But rough clothes, Jeff saw, did not rob Maria Foster of her wrongly used prettiness.

"Jeff, m'boy—!"

Doc Bolton was first to see him, and came off his rock seat. The girl whirled from tightening the pinto's cinch. Jeff read the startled looks on their faces as guilt. Reining in, he had his long-barreled Colt in his hand. "Folks," he said, "I've come for my poke."

CHAPTER THREE

Paper for Gold

FOR once, Doc Bolton was speechless. The threatening pistol, the chill metallic eyes behind the weapon, held him tongue-tied. The only sound coming from his lips was an incoherent sputtering. But the girl, despite her frightened look, said, "Your gold is safe, Mister Random. No need to hold a gun on us."

"Safe?" said Jeff, jolted yet wary of a trick. "What you mean?"

"You and Pa came back—well, drunk," Maria Foster said coldly. "A couple of footpads jumped you just as you got back to our camp in the yard by Bisbee's Store. I heard the rumpus, and I grabbed a gun and ran from my tent, and started screaming. . . ."

She paused, suddenly breathless.

"Well, it's the truth," she said, sharply. "Pa and I chased the robbers off, and then we carried you into the yard and put you in your blankets. When we were ready to pull out this morning, we couldn't wake you." She paused, gave him a severe look. "I hate men who drink too much!"

"Where's my poke?" Jeff demanded.

"My step-brother, Steve, stayed in Sacramento," Maria went on. "I told him to tell you, if you ever slept off your drunk, that I placed your poke in Adams & Co., for safekeeping. A man with your bad habits can't hold onto a pokeful of gold."

Jeff lowered, then holstered his pistol. He was beginning to feel a little foolish, and yet, at the same time, he didn't quite believe the girl's story. It was too fumbling, and it rang a little hollowly like a doubtful coin. He said, "All I got to do is ask Adams & Co. for it?"

"That's all," said Maria. "And if you don't trust me, I'll go with you. I was getting ready to ride into Sacramento, anyway, to fetch a wagonwright to fix Pa's busted axle."

She took up the pinto's reins, swung lightly to the saddle. Jeff swung his dun and rode beside her, back along the Sacramento road. They covered the distance in silence, except when Jeff said uneasily, "*I'm* sure sorry, accusing you like that, Maria."

The girl gave him a chill look. "From now on, Mister Random," she said, "we're not on speaking terms."

"But, ma'am—"

Maria turned her head.

ADAMS' Sacramento branch office was on Second Street, and when Jeff turned into the street with the girl he saw a great milling crowd before the building housing the express company. There was a roar of angry voices, and some of the more violent men in the crowd were heaving rocks and sticks at the Adams' building. Jeff reined in, instinctively aware that disaster had struck. But only by mingling with the wildly excited crowd was he to learn the details.

Word had just come up from San Francisco telling of the arrival of the steamship *Oregon* which had brought tragic news from the East. Page, Bacon & Co., of St. Louis, the biggest banking firm in the West, had failed. And Page, Bacon was supposedly linked with Adams & Co. The banking firm's failure had caused a financial panic, and now Adams was caught up in it. The managing director of the express company had absconded, and his flight was closing the doors of every Adams branch. The Sacramento office was closed down, and a sheriff's notice was tacked to the door. And all these men, on the verge of riot, had entrusted money or paydirt to Adams.

Learning so much, Jeff stared at Maria Foster. She was pale, frightened, and she stammered, "I—I didn't know. Believe me!"

Jeff turned angrily from her and started shouldering his way through the crowd. When he reached Adams' door, it opened and the company cashier, flanked by two armed deputy sheriffs emerged. Despite the lawmen, Jeff collared the cashier.

"Look, you! I want that poke of mine!"

The cashier looked tired, scared. "It's out of my hands," he mumbled. You'll have to see the receiver."

Jeff demanded an explanation, for he did not know what a receiver might be. The cashier explained, to the crowd as well as to Jeff. With the failing concern in the hands of the sheriff, an official called a receiver was taking over what assets remained. As long as these assets held out, depositors would receive their accounts on presentation of their certificates of deposits. The crowd was told—by the deputies—to line up in orderly fashion.

There was a wild surging of the crowd, men fighting for first place in the line. It was clear to every one of the hundreds of men that only a few would get their money. Jeff grabbed at a man, and demanded, "What're these certificates?"

"The paper Adams gave you when the agent took your money, friend!"

Paper?

Jeff had no paper. He fought his way out of the wild mob, and found Maria Foster waiting with the horses. "You get a paper when you gave this no-good outfit my poke?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Where is it?" Jeff felt like cursing. "Hand it over!"

Consernation crossed the girl's face. "I—I left it at the wagon," she said brokenly. "I didn't think it was important, because I did give the cashier your name. Must you have it?"

Jeff groaned. He had the fleeting thought that until he met this girl his luck had been good. Now it had turned bad, and she was to blame. By the time he rode out to Doc Bolton's wagon, got the certificate and returned, the Adams' safe would be empty. But, looking at the shoving, yelling crowd, Jeff knew that even if he had the paper in his hand now there would be no chance at all of his getting back his twelve thousand dollars in gold.

A man came riding furiously by, circling the crowd and racing on. Somebody in the crowd shouted, "That's Hank Bellow, aheading for Portland and trying to beat the bad news there—and collect his money!"

The idea took hold, and there was a scattering of a dozen or more men. They too would find mounts and try to outrace the news of the Adams' failure to some far-off branch office, where the unsuspecting agent would permit them to withdraw the amount of money called for by their certificates of deposit. But it would have to be some very distant branch, for by now word must have spread to every nearby town or camp. Jeff mounted his dun, and said, "We're going after that paper. Come on!"

MARIA rode with him, seeming to have forgotten that she had come to town for a wagonwright. And as they rode from town and took the Placerville road, Jeff's mind worked feverishly. Once he had the necessary certificate, he would head for some back-country Adams' office. Not Portland, of course, for once Hank Bellow reached there and retrieved his own stake the cat would be out of the bag. Bellow wouldn't hold back the news. Placerville, then? Not far enough away. Grass Valley? Georgetown? Both too close.

Beside him, riding stirrup to stirrup with him, Maria Foster said, "Jeff, please believe that I'm sorry. I didn't mean to risk your poke. It seemed that Adams & Co. was as sound as a mint."

"Forget it," Jeff said.

His curtness brought hurt to her eyes. Maria bit her lower lip, much like a little girl trying to hold back tears. After another half mile of riding, she said, "I guess you have reason to hate me."

"Well, your step-pa doped my drink last night," he said flatly. "And the two hombres who jumped were friends of your step-brother. I've got a hunch that Steve Bolton was watching it all."

"Yes—yes, that's true," the girl said heavily. "I'm fond of both Doc Bolton and Steve, but I know what they are. They like to get money—lots of money—without working for it. But I don't fancy their tinhorn tricks. That's why I took your poke last night."

"You really scared off Peruvian Jack and Sam Burgard with a gun?" Jeff asked, some of the hardness leaving his voice.

Maria nodded. "I have an old single shot pistol that belonged to my father—my right father. Those two no-goods were scared that I would fire my one shot, and neither one wanted to risk being the man who was hit. Steve *was* there, and he was

furious. If Pa hadn't in the end let me have my way, I couldn't have kept Steve from taking your poke. Doc Bolton's not really bad, Jeff. He's just—well, sort of tricky. I wish you could get your poke back, so you'd forgive him—and me."

Jeff softened, for no matter how angry he was, a man couldn't hate Maria Foster. But before he could speak again, they topped a rise and saw ahead Doc Bolton and his broken-down wagon. Jeff saw something more. Far out the Placerville road, three horsemen were high-tailing it. The three were too far off for him to identify them, but he had a hunch that they were Steve Bolton, and his two hardcased companions, Peruvian Jack and Sam Burgard. The trio was gone from sight by the time Jeff and the girl reined in by the wagon.

Maria dismounted, ran to the wagon, saying, "Pa I forgot to give Jeff his deposit certificate." She did not see the guilty look that spread over Doc Bolton's fat face. But Jeff Random did.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhacker Barrier

DOC BOLTON'S face took on a pasty look, and, like a man seeking escape from a closing trap, rolled his baby blue eyes first one way and then another. The girl had climbed into the wagon, and so was unaware of her step-father's agitation. Jeff lay a hand on his pistol. "Don't squirm so much, Doc," he said.

From under the wagon's canvas top came a startled exclamation. A moment later, Maria appeared and dropped over the tailgate. "Jeff, it's gone! I'd put the paper in the pocket of my blue gingham dress, but it's not there now. I must have lost it!"

Her distress seemed real enough, but once again Jeff had his doubts about her. All this fooling around, he told himself quickly, might be a trick to mislead him. Once again in the presence of these two people, he drew and levelled his Colt. "I want that paper, pronto," he said savagely.

Maria turned to her step-father. "Pa, you didn't—?"

Doc Bolton's face glistened with sudden sweat. He tried a ragged grin. "What good is that certificate now?" he asked. And answered his own question. "Adams & Co. has closed its doors. Thousands of men like you, Jeff, are losing their money and paydirt."

"How come you know about Adams?" Jeff demanded. "That dude son of yours was here and told you, I reckon. And you gave him my certificate, in the hope that he and his no-good partners could claim my poke at Adams office in the back-country. Where'd those three head for, Doc?" He cocked the aimed pistol. "Talk up!"

"Me, I don't know!" Doc Bolton muttered. "Steve don't tell me where he rides. I figure he's headed for Placerville."

"Damn you, Doc—must I shoot you down?"

The girl placed herself between them, and begged, "Please, Jeff! Don't be something you'll regret the rest of your life. Let me talk to Pa. . . . Please!"

"I've wasted enough time."

"Give me one minute!"

"All right, but I'm keeping my eye on the two of you."

He watched them move to the front of the wagon, where they fell into a low-voiced argument. Jeff could not hear their words, but he could see that Maria was one person who could out-talk old Doc Bolton. It took much longer than a minute, but finally the girl left her chastened step-father. She climbed into the wagon for the second time, but re-appeared almost at once. She brought a bedroll, which she tied to the cantle of her pinto's saddle. She carried too an old cap-and-ball single shot pistol, and stowed it away in her saddle bag. Jeff watched in silence until she had mounted, then asked, What're you up to?"

"I'm going with you," she said coldly. "I want to keep you from killing or being killed. Steve and his two friends are heading for Western Utah—what some folks call Nevada. Gold has been discovered in the Washoe Mountains, beyond the Sierras, and Adams & Co. have a branch office in a small camp called Palisade. Pa says Steve and the other two are hoping to get there before news of Adams' failure reaches the town. Pa didn't give Steve your certificate of deposit. Steve came to take it from me, and when he found me gone he searched my things in the wagon. Steve is keeping bad company, and he—"

Jeff said curtly, "I know what Steve is. Let's ride."

The girl swung her pinto mare onto the road, and it was she who set the pace. Jeff rode beside her, not sure in his mind whether he should trust or doubt her. This talk of a Adams office at some new camp beyond the Sierras might be another trick. How could he be sure, he asked himself, that the twelve-thousand-dollar poke had been deposited in his name? He had only Maria Foster's word for it. He hadn't seen the paper. It might be that she was leading him on a wild goose chase, while Steve Bolton and his hardcased companions headed for some Adams office unknown to him. *I'll find out at Placerville,* Jeff told himself.

THE road climbed into the mountains, and the horses began to blow. They passed freight wagons on the trail, and other riders. Well into the gold-hills now, they glimpsed prospectors in great number and an occasional diggings. When they reached the shanty town of Placerville, Jeff knew that they needed fresh mounts. They had pushed their horses too hard for too long a stretch. Jeff turned in at a livery barn.

"I'll make a trade here," he told Maria. "You see if you can get some grub we can eat on the trail."

They would need food, but he wanted her out of the way while he asked some questions. When the girl had hurried away on foot, he talked to the liveryman, Jeb Payson, who took him around back to a corral which held a dozen horses. Three of the animals, Payson explained, had come in not more than an hour before. Three men in a hurry had traded them off for fresh mounts. "I take it, you and your missus are in as big a hurry," Payson said.

Jeff was looking the horses over with a Texan's skilled eye. "The sorrel and the big bay," he said. "My horses and ten dollars, in a trade."

"Make it twenty dollars, stranger."

"I got no time to haggle," Jeff said, and dug into his pocket.

He stripped saddles and bridles off his own and Maria's horse while the liveryman roped the two horses he had chosen. Jeff put his own gear onto the big bay gelding, and the girl's onto the sorrel. When he was finished, he said, "Friend, you hold my two horses until I get back, I'll make it worth your while."

"It's a deal."

"You ever hear of a mining camp called Palisade?"

"Seems I have," Payson said. "There's been talk of late that gold's been found over in Utah Territory, but I figure it's just that, talk."

The girl returned at that moment, carrying a flour sack half-filled with grub. Without a word, she tied the sack to her saddle horn and then mounted the sorrel. The animal bucked a little, but Maria Foster had long ago proved to Jeff Random that she could ride with the best of men. He watched her control the sorrel with an expert hand, then he mounted the bay. The liveryman was eying them thoughtfully, and now said, "You hear that Page, Bacon and Adams & Co. closed their doors?"

"When did this happen?" Jeff said.

"A rider from Sacramento brought the news just this afternoon."

"The news cause any trouble here?"

"The Adams agent here blamed near got lynched," the liveryman said.

Jeff nodded to the girl, and they swung away. Midway through town, he said, "We've got no time to waste. That hombre smells a rat, and he's going to talk. He'll have half the men in this town heading for Palisade. But first, we've got to ask our way."

"Never mind that," Maria said, in that barely civil tone she now used toward him. "I've talked to the town marshal. There is a camp named Palisade, and we follow this road."

Jeff could not help giving her an admiring look.

"And another thing I found out," she said. "Steve Bolton and the other two are only an hour ahead of us. They didn't waste any time here."

Jeff said, "Obliged to you." But he was thinking that an hour on this trail, with a small fortune at stake, might as well be a week or a month or a year. He was almost convinced that they could not overtake their quarry.

THEY ate on the move, and the road climbed into the high Sierras. Darkness overtook them, and there in the moun-

tains it was bitter cold. Both Jeff and the girl were fortunate in having gloves and heavy coats, Jeff pulling his from his saddle bag. The mountain road, always climbing or sloping downward again, and always winding one way or another, was the loneliest place on earth. If there were camps or solitary diggings off the trail, the darkness concealed them. But close to midnight, they glimpsed a light.

It was a grubby wayside saloon and eating-place, a one room log building. The horses were all but done in from being hard pushed, and Jeff knew, from his own aching muscles, that Maria must be in need of a rest. He took time out, and they warmed themselves within the building while drinking coffee served hot and black by the Ute wife of the proprietor. Jeff asked about horses, and the ruddy-faced man who owned the place shook his head.

"Three hombres stopped by here, about an hour ago," he said. "They wanted grub and horses—and they asked with guns in their hands. They got fed, but I've got no horses for anybody."

Jeff could not hide his disappointment. He said to Maria, "Sensible thing for you is to stay here overnight, then head back to Doc Bolton in the morning."

She set down her coffee cup, and firmly said, "I'm riding with you."

He frowned, and he felt like shaking her. Yet, at the same time, he was somehow pleased. Maria Foster might be bad luck, to him, but he liked her company. He said, "For your own good."

"I'm riding with you," the girl said, and pulled on her gloves.

There was no time to argue, so Jeff paid for the coffee and turned to the door. He opened and stepped out, for an instant outlined by the candlelight within the cabin. And a gun blasted, loud against the night quiet.

The slug thudded into the log wall, and Jeff felt a flying splinter sting his face. Maria was a step behind him, and he shoved her back inside with a sweep of his arm. Almost with the same movement, he pulled the door shut. With the dim candlelight gone, the darkness was inky black. But another shot came, and Jeff saw a lurid spurt of powder-flame. He pulled his pistol, and fired three quickly aimed shots where the ambush gun had flashed. A man's scream lifted, to end in a wild thrashing and a heavy groan.

CHAPTER FIVE

End of the trail. . . .

A SPOOKED horse, riderless, came from the timber edging the opposite side of the road. Plunging and rearing, the animal stampeded until brought to an abrupt halt by stepping on its dragging reins. Crouched low, Jeff waited with ready gun. But no more shots came from the ambush. The hidden man cursed, in Spanish, then his voice weakened and failed. Fearing a trick, Jeff waited longer. He grew stiff from his awkward position and from the cold. Then at last, he rose and backed to the door. It opened for him, and Maria Foster said shakenly, "You're all right?"

"So far—yes."

"Who was it?" the girl asked, fearfully. "Not Steve?"

"Not Steve," Jeff told her. "Peruvian Jack."

Once again, he tried to make her see that she should not go on. But Maria was more than ever determined to ride with him. And as they stood there arguing, the saloonkeeper came forward and said, "If that's the sort of hombres you're up against, I'll find some horses for you. There's a friend of mine back in the hills a mile who'll make a trade."

More precious time was wasted, but Jeff willingly exchanged time for fresh mounts. After shifting saddles, he gave the saloonkeeper his last ten-dollar gold piece. He and Maria headed out, and no sound or movement or shot came from the dark patch of timber in which Peruvian Jack had set his unrewarded trap.

Jeff rode more warily now, convinced that there was danger of another ambush. With the horse held to a walk, he reloaded the three fired chambers in his pistol. He saw how the girl kept watching him; and at last he said, angered, "It was his life or mine. I didn't set out to kill the man, and you know it!"

"I'm not blaming you," Maria said dully. "That wasn't in my mind. I was thinking, wondering, who would be next—you or

Steve or Sam Burgard." She shuddered. "It's evil . . . men dying for a bag of gold."

She fell silent, and another mile or more had passed on that seemingly endless trail when Jeff said, "This is a man's game. A woman has no right to meddle in it." And Maria retorted, "And where would you be, if I hadn't sided you?"

That, Jeff knew, was something to think about.

They no longer pushed their mounts, for they themselves were all but spent. Most of a day and a night in the saddle had lay a burden on Jeff's muscles, and he knew that the girl must be far more tired than he. When he saw her doze, her shoulders slumped and her head bowed, he held the horses down to a walk. He knew that she was bad luck to him, yet if the choice was his he would not have parted from her. He remembered how she had looked when he first saw her in Sacramento, and how wonderful she had seemed when he watched her that night as she prepared supper. . . . And now he told himself that no matter what her menfolks were, Maria Foster was not a bad woman. He didn't want her to be anything but the sort of girl a man like himself could put into his dreams.

They rode the night through, and when daylight came there was no sun. The mountain sky was a bleak gray, and there was a chill wind that brought at times swirling clouds of snow. Jeff and the girl rested their horses, and ate what food remained in the flour sack. And rode on again. The trail was growing obscure now, no longer a wagon road but a narrow trail, and only once during the day did they chance upon other travelers. A Placerville-bound mule train, driven by a half-breed Ute and a black-bearded white man, came to meet and pass them. To Jeff's question, the white man said, "Sure; you're on the trail to the Washoes and Palisade."

"You pass two men on the trail?"

"Yep. Less than half hour back."

Riding on, Jeff told himself, "There's time! Without the girl I could ride down Steve Bolton and that hardcase, Sam Burgard!"

Maria must have read his thoughts, for she said. "You're not riding out on me! I'm not going to let you kill Steve Bolton!"

Bitterly, Jeff shot back, "Maybe he'd kill me. But that wouldn't matter to you."

"Wouldn't it?" the girl asked, and her tired face showed a faint smile.

AFTER the mighty Sierras, the Washoe Mountains were mere rocky mounds. A barren country, it seemed to Jeff Random's tired eyes. The highest, snow-capped peak was perhaps a two-thousand foot uplift. But the Washoes were mere hills, and their ice-fringed streams tiny shallow gutters. The near-end of the long trail was not much to the eye.

"This must be the place," he said, and received no reply from Maria Foster.

He looked at her tired, cold-pinched face and, at that moment, would have given up his gold to have her back in warm and comfortable Sacramento. He wished that he himself were there, for in all their riding—Jeff had lost all track of time—they had not caught a glimpse of the two men they followed. Because of the girl, Jeff had held back. He had given Steve Bolton and Sam Burgard plenty of time to reach Palisade—to cash that certificate of deposit, and vanish. Maybe, Jeff's mind said, that was her game. But he did not want to believe that Maria had deliberately delayed him.

In the end, it was the girl who first sighted the camp. "There—on that slope!" she cried.

Jeff saw the camp, precariously perched midway up a steep grade. It was a single row of log and frame buildings, and higher up the slope were the diggings. A few men were moving about their glory holes. Jeff lifted his tired horse into a lope, and Maria, determined as ever, rode just behind him. They climbed the slope and turned into the bleak little camp. Scattered before the few buildings were some horses and a string of pack mules. Jeff saw over a box-like frame building, and it read: Adams & Co.

He swung toward the express company building, and saw now two blown horses standing hip-shot and dejected by the hitch-rail. Steve Bolton's and Sam Burgard's. . . .? Jeff glanced about. The only men in sight were two men saddling the pack mules. Swinging down, Jeff ran to the door of the Adams building, flung it open, stepped into the small office—with his pistol in his hand.

The Adams agent looked up from weigh-

ing gold dust on his scales, and the man for whom the dust was being weighed out whirled around. Jeff ignored the agent and levelled his pistol at Steve Bolton.

"You almost made it, Steve," Jeff said flatly. "Almost, but not quite. Step aside. I'll take that gold."

HE KEPT his gun pointed at the dudish fat young man, but he darted a glance at the agent. "Don't you meddle in this," he warned. "My name is Jeff Random, and that paper you've got there is my certificate of deposit. It was stolen from me—by this fat dude. Weigh out what the paper calls for, and hand it over."

And a voice behind him said, "That's the truth. This man is the owner of the certificate." It was Maria Foster's voice. "This other man is my step-brother, and he stole the certificate and headed for this place to cash it in."

Steve said, almost shouting it, "You ungrateful—"

Jeff hit him, squarely across the mouth with his left hand. Steve reeled back against the wall, cursing and reaching inside his coat. Jeff stepped over and grabbed the small pocket pistol from the man's hand. He turned back to the agent, and demanded, "Hand it over, mister!"

The thin-faced agent shrugged and muttered, "No skin off my hide." He finished at the scales and placed the dust in five small leather pouches fitted with draw strings. "I've taken out Adams' charge for handling this amount of gold," he said.

"You're welcome to it," Jeff said. "Maria, carry these pokes out and put them in my saddle bag."

The girl obeyed, not looking at her infuriated step-brother.

Jeff said, "Now you, Steve, walk out ahead of me."

Steve cursed him but went out. Jeff followed close behind, and saw Maria turn from placing the gold-filled pokes into his saddle-bag. He said to her, You've done what you came to do—kept me from killing this no-good step-brother of yours. Are you riding back with me?"

"That's up to you."

"What do you mean, up to me?"

"Do you want me to ride back with you?" Maria said. "You've got your gold. You don't need me around anymore."

Jeff had no chance to reply. Steve Bolton whirled around and his big fist caught Jeff squarely between the eyes. The blow sent him reeling backwards, momentarily blinded. He heard a scream—Maria's scream—and then two quick shots.

His vision cleared, but all he saw was the bulky form of Steve Bolton lunging at him. Another blow slammed into him—a knee to his groin—and he bent double with pain and the breath knocked out of him. The pistol was wrenched from his hand, and he heard Steve Bolton yell, "Now, you son—" Jeff grabbed at Steve's legs, shoved hard against them, and the man went over backwards. The pistol blasted but into the air. Grappling, clawing, hitting at each other, they rolled over and over. The pistol barrel crashed against Jeff's shoulder, and pain shot all the way to his fingers. The weapon started another blow, but Jeff got his right arm free and drove his fist into Steve's face. He felt the pudgy body beneath him grow limp. He hit Steve Bolton again and again, until he realized that the man was not only bloody and beaten but unconscious as well. He rose then, with the pistol in his hand.

The first thing he saw was Maria with her old cap-and-ball pistol in her hand, and a shocked look on her face. Next, he saw big Sam Burgard some thirty feet away. The hardcase held his left hand to his right shoulder, and a trickle of blood from a wound was spilling out over his fingers. Burgard's pistol lay at his feet.

"You?" Jeff said, to the girl.

"He was going to shoot you in the back," Maria said hollowly. My shot ruined his aim."

Jeff walked over and picked up Burgard's pistol and thrust it into the waistband of his jeans. The hardcase began a muttered cursing. There was an audience to all this; a dozen or more men, including the Adams agent, had come into the street. But none of them seemed inclined to interfere. Jeff returned to his horse, and mounted.

Maria stood waiting, looking up at him.

"Well?" he said.

"I'm waiting for you to say you want me to ride with you."

"You know the answer," Jeff said. "I want you to ride with me—wherever I go."

THE END

BLIZZARD MANHUNT

"You going to hold that gun all winter, Sheriff?"

By Ralph Berard

The snow lay deep and quiet around the cabin shared by lawman and outlaw . . . but Sheriff Joe Ketchum knew that with the spring thaw one of them would have to die!

THE trail Sheriff Joe Ketchum followed was plain in the snow. Red Drago's horse had floundered into a gully, then up a rise about fifty feet further on. Ketchum figured the trail was less than half an hour cold.

The sheriff rose in his stirrups, turned his shaggy head, surveyed the terrain with care. There was an increasing chill in the late afternoon air. "Storm coming," he muttered ominously. The sheriff had to decide whether to turn back. It might be his last chance.

Steam rose off the sleek coat of the sheriff's perspiring mount. The atmosphere was suddenly heavy with the intense, disturbing silence that comes before a change of wind. Every minute Ketchum wasted in indecision would increase the distance Red Drago could put between them.

He made his final decision against his better judgment. Red Drago had a price on his head. The sheriff had vowed to bring him in. Now he urged his tan gelding forward as a cutting north wind swept down off Baldy Peak. Driving ice pellets came with it.

Ketchum swore softly. Grey daylight would not last long. He strained his eyes upon the bandit's trail. Shortly the storm would blot out everything. He attempted haste but his hurry was futile. It exhausted his mount the sooner. Night swept out of heaven without bringing darkness. There was only an increasing grey snow storm which quickly laid a stark white blanket on the earth.

By midnight, though snow still fell, the temperature was bitter, killing. The bandit's trail was gone. Turning back was useless. Going on became impossible.

The tall sturdy law dog's determination to bring in his man had tricked his better judgment. His fight now became a matter of life and death. He moved forward because movement was imperative to preserve circulation.

Unexpectedly, a light became visible. A tiny speck of yellow flickered, then was gone. It re-appeared, was gone again.

Ketchum stopped his horse, stared unbelievingly. The warm smell of the gelding's breath wafted back against his freezing face. Who could be burning a light in this cold barren spot. . . ? But certainly there was a light ahead through the scrub. Ketchum made for it, hope rising in him, his horse floundering and blowing, near final exhaustion.

In the center of an open space sat a cabin. From a tiny window the glow of an oil lamp leaped outward into the all-consuming panic of twisting snowflakes.

Ketchum slid off his horse. His numbed fingers drew a gun, just to be careful. He tapped on the shelter door with the barrel. There was a moment of silence, then an almost cheerful voice shouted, "Come on in, sheriff. I been waitin'."

Ketchum kicked the door open. He brought the gun to bear on Red Drago inside. "This is it, Red. Reach for the ceiling."

But Drago did not reach for the ceiling. He sat on a dry goods box near a badly rusted air-tight heater. With a large pocket knife, he was shaving kindling from dry cedar sticks. The outlaw was a giant in stature. His hair was a bushy red growth on top of a rather well-shaped head. His brown eyes sparkled with something akin to amusement. "You goin' to stand and hold that gun pointed at me till spring, sheriff?"

Ketchum shifted his weight. He transfered the gun to his left hand, flexed the numbed fingers of his right. A draft of air rumbled in the stove pipe. The cherry red stove threw off a welcome warmth.

The sheriff stood with pointed gun. He was a man in his middle thirties, as big and powerful as the bandit. For ten years he had ridden the law in Boulder County. But here was something new. Here was a set-up even Joe Ketchum had never quite figured on.

The bandit turned his attention back to his kindling-making. The sheriff became conscious of the weight of the gun in his hand. You couldn't shoot a man who offered no resistance.

Drago seemed to interpret the lawman's thoughts. "Better go and put your horse up, sheriff. There's a dug-out twenty-thirty yards south. My animal's there. Don't feed yours, though. There's only oats for one animal."

Ketchum holstered his gun, frowned. "Reckon you won't run off while I'm gone," he said.

Drago grinned. There was something open and likeable about this outlaw. "I ain't hardly got my feet dry," he said. "Reckon neither of us will leave here b'fore spring."

KETCHUM went out mumbling. He found the dug-out, tied the tired gelding near Drago's mount. Flurries of snow swept about him as he ploughed his way back to the cabin. This was it all right, the winter freeze-up. He took his .30-30 rifle from the scabbard along his saddle and turned toward the cabin again.

Drago began talking as soon as Ketchum was inside. "After me savin' your life, sheriff, it was kinda unfriendly, you pointin' that gun at me." The outlaw's dark eyes settled on the lawman with an expression of amusement.

"You saved my life?" Ketchum leaned his rifle behind the cabin door, pulled up a bench near Drago. He sat down by the stove, began unlacing his wet boots.

"If I'd kept the light out, you'd likely gone on down the gully," the bandit pointed out. "You'd never made it. The wolves woulda got you."

Ketchum considered this statement a moment, pulled off his other boot. "Might of missed the cabin," he conceded.

"I saw you comin'," Drago said. "You were pretty big and black and plain breaking into the clear space out of the brush, too exhausted to be real careful I reckon. I might just as well have killed you." He nodded toward his own 35-40 leaning in a far corner. "One shot in a storm. Nobody the wiser."

Ketchum considered this. Now that the stove's warmth was getting into his marrow, he recalled how cold and miserable he'd been. "Why didn't you kill me?" His eyes settled on Drago's face.

Drago folded shut the jack-knife. "A good deal had to be considered. I don't like murder. You got a wife and kid besides. They'll worry a lot anyway."

"You don't give a damn about that." Ketchum was incredulous.

"Yeah, sheriff. It's too bad they got to worry."

"You never worried before about wives and kids of men you killed," Ketchum accused.

"I never murdered anybody, sheriff. When things was close I had to shoot t' get away. That's a little bit different."

Ketchum turned his boots, reached behind the stove for a new chunk of wood. Drago laid a quick restraining hand on his arm. "You'll have to agree to help cut more if you burn my wood. My boots is already dry."

Ketchum drew back his arm. His eyes hardened.

Drago's smiled faded out. "I prepared a hide-out. There's food for one man, fuel for one. Oats and hay for one horse." His features hardened till his eyes were like cold, dark glass. "Another reason I didn't kill you is because one man isn't safe alone all winter. There are wolves and cougars outside. A man can get pneumonia inside. If one of us gets sick, the other's got to fetch water and fuel. We got to share grub."

Tense moments passed while the two men measured each other. As the hardness in Ketchum's face relaxed, Drago released the grip on his arm. Ketchum reached for the wood. "We'll take turns sawing and splitting," he said.

Drago stood up, yawned. "With *my* saw and *my* axe." He unbuckled his gun belt, hung the guns on a nail behind the door.

The sheriff laughed with a little sarcasm. "*Your* axe! *Your* saw! I bet you stole 'em."

"The important thing is that they're here," Drago said grinning. He crawled into the cabin's one bunk. "You take the floor tonight, sheriff. Tomorrow night you get the bunk. When you get sleepy, blow out the lamp and put out the cat." The bandit soon was sleeping with no weapon anywhere near his reach.

Ketchum blew out the lamp, carefully adjusted the stove damper, then stood a moment looking down at Drago's face. The outlaw slept peacefully. Ketchum tried to consider how the outlaw might feel about himself. Drago had started down the Primrose Path when just a kid. He'd held up a stage with an owlhooter named Jolsen. Maybe Drago hadn't been in favor of killings that had happened, the sheriff thought. Jolsen had been killed by a marshal in New Mexico. Drago had turned up robbing banks. When one thought about it, there was considerable to think about. The kid had got a bad start through someone else's influence. After he'd got started, what else could he do?

Ketchum forced an end to such thinking. "Hell," he mumbled, "it ain't for me to make excuses for him. Bringing him in is my business."

KETCHUM awoke to find Drago shaking his shoulder. The cabin was filled with the pleasing odor of griddle cakes. "The law and the outlaw breakfast together," Drago laughed.

While they ate, Ketchum observed the new snow piled high outside, the grey coldness of the heavens. Drago said, "We'll take turns tying the horses outside. There's only food for one but a horse will paw through snow and strip roots and twigs for a little nourishment."

"They'll pull through on half rations," Ketchum agreed, "but they'll be only skin and bone come spring."

"That'll make it even when you take up my trail again," Drago said.

"'I'm taking you in," Ketchum vowed

unrelentingly. "You're under arrest right now."

"That's your viewpoint, sheriff. I got my own ideas."

The night before Christmas was clear and cold. Ketchum, thinking of Martha and Bobby at home, was glum. Drago came in with an armful of wood. The outlaw began joking. "A time for gifts and drinking." They seated themselves at their crude table. They had had good hunting and the table was laden with fresh game. "No whiskey," Drago remarked solemnly, "but after dinner, I have surprises."

They cleared away the dishes. Drago's first surprise was a deck of cards. He tossed them on the table. "Poker?" he suggested jovially.

"Poker," Ketchum agreed. Drago won the deal but before distributing the cards, he stepped to their kitchen dry-goods box and brought back a paper bag. Ketchum watched with keen interest.

Drago dealt each five cards, then reached his hand into the bag. He drew forth a large pile of bank notes.

Ketchum drew in his breath.

"Surprised you, eh?" Drago divided the money into two piles. "No limit to stakes. You can't lose anything."

Ketchum thumbed through his pile of money. "How much?" His eyes narrowed on Drago's face.

"About five thousand." The outlaw spoke of five thousand as a small amount.

"Where'd you get it?"

"It wouldn't make you any happier to know," Drago said philosophically. "Let's play."

Ketchum shook his head. "It's likely blood money. I don't want that kind."

Drago shrugged. "Return what you win to whoever you think it belongs to," he agreed, "but don't worry about it for a few months yet."

By midnight Ketchum had most of Drago's pile. Then Drago won it almost all back before Ketchum noted the strange run of the cards. A three of a kind hand of his was topped by Drago putting down three aces.

Ketchum leaned forward, placed his elbows on the table, centered his gaze on Drago's face. "You cheated," he accused quietly. "That third ace came off the bottom of the deck."

Drago shrugged. He jerked his head up, tossing his long red hair back boisterously. "What's the odds, Sheriff? The money ain't ours. We're just having fun."

Ketchum considered this a spell. "I guess that's right. It seems like an odd way to look at things."

"How one looks at things makes 'em right or wrong, eh, Sheriff?" Drago started laughing and laughed till his stomach shook. His good humor became contagious. Drago counted out two thousand dollars, handed it across the table. "A Christmas present, Sheriff. 'Twas mine, 'tis yours and has been slave to thousands.' I'm an educated bandit; I know Shakespeare and everything."

During the cold January nights, they gambled the time away. At times Ketchum found himself almost sharing Drago's strange philosophy. "The money ain't worth a damn," Drago would say. "It won't buy anything. It won't hire anybody."

One night Drago turned suddenly serious. "When spring comes," he snapped unexpectedly, "we'll see what money means. We'll see whether you're human, Sheriff, or just a dog of the law, an animal trained for the kill."

Ketchum looked up surprised.

Drago's eyes held their usual bright light. Now it was a hot, challenging light. "You still think I'm under arrest, Ketchum?"

"You're my prisoner," Ketchum said, "It's my duty to take you in."

Drago picked up the cards absently, without taking his eyes from Ketchum's. "Sheriff," he said quietly, "you're a fool."

FROM that night the tension between them grew. The first break in winter began to appear. The weakened horses pawed the snow with new hope. Occasionally the noonday sun held a bit of warmth. The time came when the depth of the snow lessened. New flurries that came were wet and fretful.

The evening poker games became tense and strained. Drago won all the money back and Ketchum could not detect that he cheated. When it was all piled on his side, the outlaw said, "We'll quit poker. I had the money when we came. If you had it, you wouldn't know where to return it. That would bother you."

Ketchum said, "We won't both leave here

alive unless you go along as my prisoner."

Drago placed his elbows on the table, his chin upon his palms. The old smile of the long winter evenings came to his features. "I hoped you might learn something this winter," he said quietly. "Something about life; something about men. I never chose to be an outlaw. Men, circumstances, fate, luck, made me what I am. I never had a chance of going straight before. Now you pose as the great protector of society and stand in the way of the new start I plan to make."

Drago shrugged contemptuously and laughed. "I've made a lot of mistakes in my time. Maybe I should have killed you the night you came. You never appreciated me saving your life."

Next morning Ketchum awoke with a start. Bright sunlight was streaming in. There was an unnatural chill in the cabin.

The sheriff sat up. He reached his hand toward the stove. The metal was cold. He looked toward Drago's bed. The place was empty.

Ketchum leaped up. He tossed on his clothes, noting that Drago's rifle was not in its place. Drago's coat and hat were gone.

Ketchum ran to the window. Drago's horse, thin and emaciated, but still able to bear its rider, appeared at the far side of the dug-out.

Ketchum grabbed his 30-30, jerked open the door and rushed outside yelling, "Stop, Drago, stop. Don't try to get away."

The outlaw was not yet far away. There was a smile on his face as he turned his mount. He raised his right hand. "Good-bye, Sheriff."

Ketchum dropped to one knee. His rifle came to his shoulder. "Stop, Drago," he shouted. He sighted along the rifle barrel, hesitated. One sure shot would bring the outlaw down. "Stop, Drago. I'll have to kill you."

The outlaw waved. "Good-bye, Sheriff. Good luck." The weakened horse began bearing him away in spite of breaking ice and storm debris which still littered the trail.

Ketchum raised the rifle, sighted carefully. The gun spoke.

Drago rode on.

Ketchum fired again and again until the rifle was empty. Drago disappeared in the brush and the sheriff slowly lowered his weapon, not bothering to eject the last empty shell.

Back in the cabin, Ketchum was assailed with a strange sort of lonesome feeling. He began gathering things together to leave. Under a corner of his saddle blanket he found a folded paper.

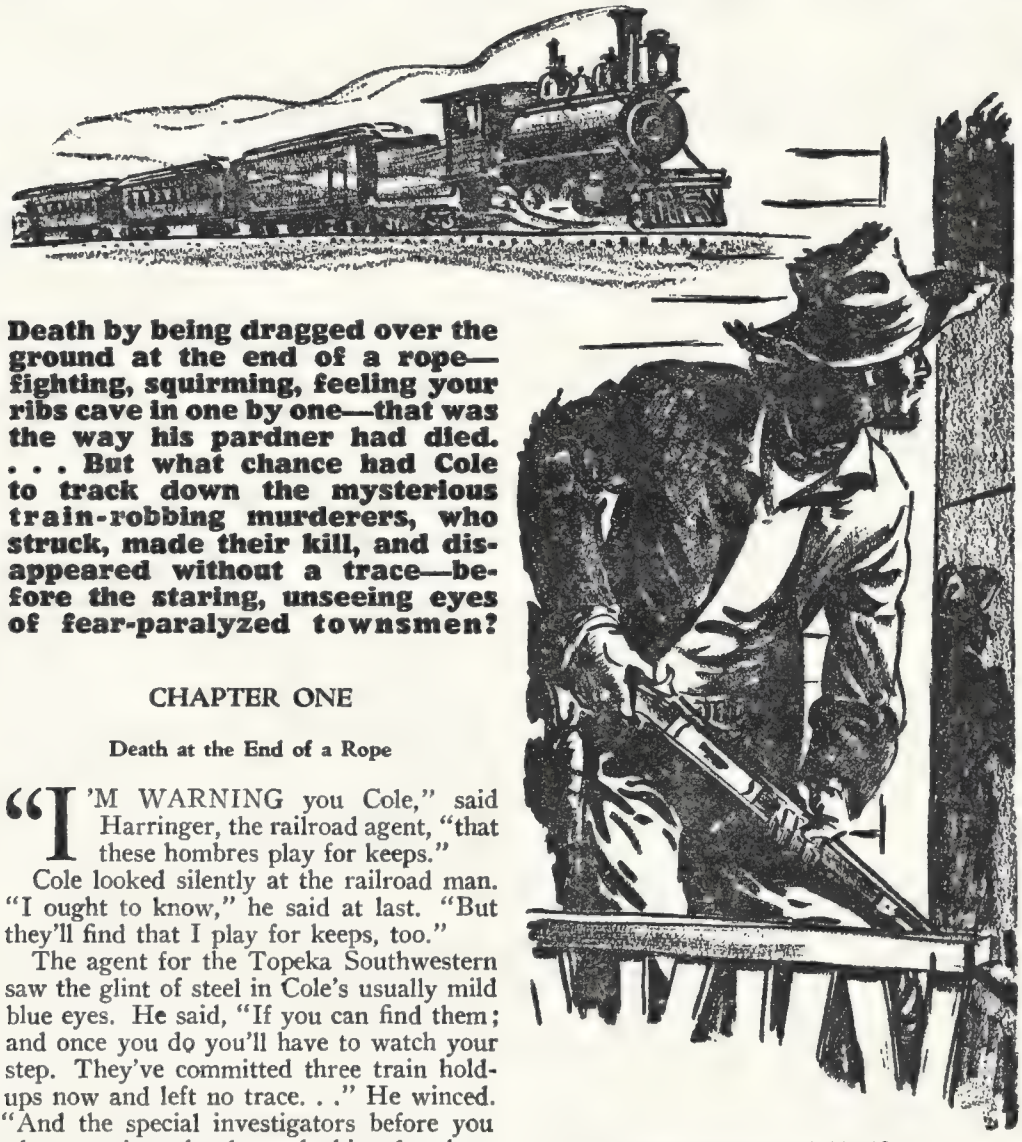
Drago had written:

> It's only two miles across the divide. I leave you in fair, honest fashion just as we were last fall. By the time you read this I will be as far ahead as I was then. Your horse is in worse shape but so is mine.
>
> One thing you may not consider fair. I took the lead out of the cartridges in your rifle so you will be shooting blanks at me. You were not near enough to shoot me last fall and I refrained from shooting you. Don't worry if I get away. I never wanted the owlhoot. I never chose it. I was riding for the east and a new start when you and the storm caught up. That's where I'm going now.

Ketchum laid the note on the table. He methodically pumped the last empty cartridge from his rifle and stood holding it in his hand, looking at it and beginning to smile to himself. "Drago," he said, as if the outlaw were still right there in the room, "you didn't have to remove the leads from the shells. I was never more careful of anything than the way I shot to be sure I wouldn't hit you."

The sheriff was still grinning as his mind turned to thinking how happy his wife and boy would be when he rode home. Then he laughed out loud at himself. It was silly the way he had gone through the motions of performing his duty by pretending to be shooting at the fleeing outlaw when he knew right down in his heart that his real duty was something bigger and better. He sure hoped Drago would make good at whatever he tackled.

Colorful Frontier Novelette • • • By Van Cort



Death by being dragged over the ground at the end of a rope—fighting, squirming, feeling your ribs cave in one by one—that was the way his pardner had died. . . . But what chance had Cole to track down the mysterious train-robbing murderers, who struck, made their kill, and disappeared without a trace—before the staring, unseeing eyes of fear-paralyzed townsmen?

The man started to lift his rifle. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Death at the End of a Rope

"I'M WARNING you Cole," said Harringer, the railroad agent, "that these hombres play for keeps."

Cole looked silently at the railroad man. "I ought to know," he said at last. "But they'll find that I play for keeps, too."

The agent for the Topeka Southwestern saw the glint of steel in Cole's usually mild blue eyes. He said, "If you can find them; and once you do you'll have to watch your step. They've committed three train hold-ups now and left no trace. . ." He winced. "And the special investigators before you who went into the desert looking for them disappeared, vanished also, without a trace. . . ."

Cole's mouth was a tight streak. "Except Steven McGregor."

"Yes," said the agent slowly, "Except Steven McGregor. We did find *him.*"

There was a salt taste of blood on Cole's tongue as he got up abruptly from his chair in the railroad's offices in Grant City, and went to the window. But he did not see the bustling streets; he was heedless of the wagon and carriage traffic, of the motley crowd of men and women who hurried by in the occupations and anxieties that went into the buiding of the vast frontier.

He was thinking of the man who *had* been found—his friend Steven McGregor, whose body, broken and mangled, had been brought in by an old prospector. It was

STAGE TO SUNDOWN

a hell of a way for a man like Steve to die, Cole thought. The sudden stab of a bullet, yes. But this—to die by being dragged over the ground at the end of a rope—fighting, squirming, feeling your ribs cave in one by one . . . Cole shook his head as though to shake the memory out.

Harringer's voice broke in on his thoughts.

"We haven't had much luck," Harringer was saying, "in finding out who, if any, of the express guards gives the information to the gang, or how it's done. But somehow, when a money or gold shipment is on the train, word is passed to whoever is lying in wait out along the line between Grant City and Santone. It's uncanny. They're shrewd, all right. . . ."

Steve had been shrewd too, Cole thought, but not shrewd enough. . . .

Cole turned his back to the window, and Harringer, the agent, went on: "Somewhere between here and Grant City, at one of the little whistlestops or way stations, someone gets wind of the money shipment; mounted men block the tracks, tie a short stick of dynamite under the express car and blow a hole in the floor. The rest is easy. The men vanish in the desert with the loot, but no posse ever runs across the riders. They sometimes find their horses, sad-

dles and all, but the men vanish like they were swallowed up."

"Ever trace the money? Does it ever show up anywhere?"

Harringer shook his head. "Looks like whoever is getting it piles it up somewhere and sits on the jackpot. And we can't put extra guards on the trains; that would kill it. We can't put a detective guard in the express car, for if it *is* one of the guards, he'd get suspicious. We want to find out how the thing is done; we've lost a lot of business as it is; if we don't watch we'll lose the mail and express franchise. The other railroads are after it."

Harringer sighed in a resigned sort of way. Then he jerked his head up as though suddenly remembering something. "There's one thing I forgot to tell you, Cole. Keep your eyes peeled for a state marshal named Haldane, slim-built fellow, blue eyes, a little stiffish, like he might of been a soldier. He's working the towns along the right of the way, just the same way you figure on doing. He won't know about you, though."

"I'll watch for him," Cole said, "though I'd better step mighty softly not to give either of us away."

There were five hundred miles between Grant City and Santone. A lot of room and a lot of places for things to happen between those two points. Still Cole said, with his hand on the doorknob. "I'll find the men who've been staging those hold-ups."

Harringer said: "You've got the code word to use on the telegraph in case you hit something. I wish you luck. I sure hope that I see you again."

CHAPTER TWO

The Signal

ONE month passed which Cole spent riding slowly out along the single line tracks of the Topeka Southwestern. The only respectable looking thing about his outfit was his grey horse. Both saddle and rider were ragged and ill-kempt. He had visited every saloon and gambling hole in every rail-town on his way; he had practically slept in the gutters, and had listened to the talk of hundreds of people. His dirty unshaven disguise might be slightly overdone, but in a way he depended on that. Looking suspicious could be handy when he contacted his quarry. When and if the gang should find him suspicious he would soon enough know it. A shot in the dark, a sudden rope. . . . He was a prowling cat in the dark, and after big and shrewd rats. . . .

He had not yet passed any of the hold-up points on the line when he reached a small whistle- and water-tank stop, called Oasis, halfway between Grant City and Santone. Jack Benbow, the dispatcher in charge of the depot, more than six feet tall, with sharp blue eyes and a high-bridged nose like a hawk's beak, was a man who liked dozing in the middle of the day in his swivel chair in the tiny office, the rowel-spikes of a pair of fine Mexican spurs rammed carelessly into his desk. He fascinated Cole, as did the man's arrogance and the fact that there was nothing to do at the depot at noon, since the express dropped no mail. Besides, a train dispatcher who acted much more importantly than a train dispatcher, deserved notice.

Cole had tried to strike up a friendship with Benbow during the several days that he had hung about the respectable little town, but Benbow had casually and good-naturedly ignored him.

Another thing which held Cole to this sleepy desert spot was the peculiarly quiet and near-friendly atmosphere which greeted him every time he entered Jackson's Emporium to drink and loaf and listen. An attitude that seemed like a careful attention about him, aroused his instincts. Suddenly he had known what it was. It was the feeling of being casually but carefully watched; and it was as unmistakable as the creeping of the hair roots on a puma hunt.

At the moment he was waiting at the depot to see the Santone express clatter by on its way westward.

The earth began shaking under him and he straightened up a little from his slouched position in the shade of the depot. The locomotive was growling now like an angry bull, tearing the cars across the level tracks with a swish and rattle and Cole began his routine watching of the train going by. After the engine would come the express and mail car, sealed and barred and with no windows to look out through. Then three or four passenger cars. The whole thing would be a matter of seconds.

The train was fifty yards away now and he glued his eyes on every unit as it passed. He saw Benbow sit up and lean on the window sill. Suddenly his pulse thrummed a faint tattoo in his ears. The express car was numbered 45, one of the six numbers he had been given. There *could* be a shipment on this one. Neither engine crew nor conductor would know anything about a shipment, and of these he could only see the engineer, who at the moment of passing was turned into the cab, talking to the fireman on the other side.

Benbow was not looking at the engineer; his eyes seemed to follow the express car and he turned his head slightly as it came abreast of the depot. No one inside the express car could look out; no one outside could see in. There was nothing unusual about the car.

But in the swirl of vapor and dust, sucked up and dispersed by the train, a tiny white object like a pebble mingled. There was a gunslot in a narrow, cylinder turret on each side of the door, and it seemed to Cole that the object sure came from one of them.

It was a small piece of chalk, such as was used aboard the car by mailmen to mark their schedules and the like on a blackboard. He saw Benbow look casually at the chalk and then turn to the desk and bury himself in the paper. But before that the two men's eyes had met for a fraction of a second and Cole had not veiled his glance quickly enough. Perhaps it meant nothing, but each knew that the other had seen the chalk.

Cole got up then and sauntered toward the town through the noon heat. He stopped momentarily at the depot corner. Benbow was buzzing the telegraph key; but his Morse was too fast for Cole to read.

A SMALL crowd of men hung on their elbows at the bar in Jackson's Emporium. Somehow the atmosphere, despite the heat, seemed slightly electric to Cole. Annie Jackson, a good looking, fortyish red-head was drinking lemonade, sitting on a stool behind the mahogany. As Cole scrambled up to the bar, bought a beer, and made himself a sandwich at the free lunch, she winked her grey-green eyes at him. "Hungry again, handsome?"

"For another look at you."

She fanned herself rapidly with a newspaper. "You wouldn't kid me, would you?" Usually she was jolly with him; today she seemed preoccupied.

"I might try," he grinned, and she gave him another look from under her lashes. He had been friendly with her like this ever since he came to town; yet underneath he had had the feeling that she was one of those who watched him. Now he slowly followed her glance and saw what preoccupied her.

Mark Sanders, her manager in charge of the gambling tables, sitting in a game nearby, called to her, half-jokingly, "That saddle-bum getting too fresh with you, Annie?"

"Nothing I can't handle," she answered, and he thought now that there was an undercurrent of meaning in her tone.

Mark was sitting in a game with Ray Hendrix and Joe Keenan, playing jackpots against a prosperous-looking cattleman. Sanders was a huge, husky, wide-jowled man, with short-cropped black hair and round eyes that always looked a little angry, like a bulls. He looked up and nodded briefly at Cole.

The three of them were obviously pooling their bets against the stranger, who kept losing pot after pot. Cole wondered why the man put up with it, since he looked as if he should know better. He was a well-built, slender man, with sharp blue eyes and a slight touch of the military about him. A hard-faced, but rather likeable looking hombre, Cole decided.

Sanders exchanged a furtive glance with Annie, and the stranger kept looking at Sanders, quietly naming his bets. Once he asked Sanders, "Ever been to Lander, Wyoming?"

Cole saw Mark stiffen a little. Keenan and Hendrix's faces were dead poker. "Never heard of the place."

"Sure?"

"Of course I'm sure; your deal."

Annie's eyes did not leave the stranger now. She spilled a little of her lemonade. It was suddenly clear to Cole that something had been cooking here for a while before he came, and that he was just about at the tail end of it, whatever it was. The cattleman had a winning streak now, but it did not make him happy; he looked jittery and uncomfortable. After a while, when

he was the dealer, he said pointedly to Mark Sanders, "I seem to be in luck suddenly."

Of a sudden Sanders' big hand swept across the table. "Easy enough when you shuffle an ace into your sleeve. Pretty neat."

"What ace?" began the stranger, then his expression froze as his eyes met Sanders'. His cards had been scattered from his hand. The two sat staring at each other for a second as if suddenly understanding each other very well. Then the cattleman decided to go for his gun.

He decided too late. There was a crash, a spit of flame, a drift of smoke across the table, and he began bowing politely, with a sigh and a groan as he laid his pistol down on the table and put his face in the cards. Blood dripped on them.

Mark was poised half out of his chair, a small revolver in his hand; even Cole hadn't seen where it came from. Keenan and Hendrix had kicked their chairs from the table and were looking just a little pale. Cole found his own gun in his hand; the draw had been unconscious and automatic.

"The tinhorn," said Mark to the quiet room and with a swift glance that took in Cole's gun. "Did you see him go for his shooter when I called his play?"

Cole was shaking; the whole thing had happened too fast for him to grasp immediately what was going on. Then suddenly, the words of Harringer, the railroad agent, flashed through his mind—"Keep your eyes peeled for a state marshal named Haldane; slim-built fellow, blue eyes, a little stiffish, like he might of been a soldier."

Cole pictured the dead man as he sat at the card table—the slender, close-knit body, the sharp blue eyes, the erect military bearing of the man. He could no longer doubt it. He had just seen Haldane shot. He kept his poker face to cover his emotion; these hombres sure did play for keeps all right. . . .

COLE reholstered his gun as unobtrusively as he could and Mark walked around the table and picked an ace out of the dead man's sleeve. "He was making up a flush. . ." For a long moment they all heard the clock on the back bar tick loudly. ". . . you all saw him reach." There was challenge in Sanders' tone.

"Nobody's blaming you, Mark." Annie came out from the bar. After a quick debate she beckoned to Sam Timmons, one of her bartenders, and together Mark and Sam carried the dead man into the backroom where he was laid out on two tables and a cloth spread over him.

From where he stood, Cole saw a flurry of motion as Annie, handkerchief in hand, made a gesture of feeling for heart-beat. He imagined he saw a flash of silver on the dead man's vest, but it could have been one of Annie's diamond rings flashing.

Sanders had returned to the table; he took a fresh deck from his pocket and was nervously cutting and shuffling. When he looked at Cole, Cole could see that he had not forgotten that quick, inadvertent draw of his, and Cole was suddenly in a cold sweat. Something was developing. He was getting warm all right.

Sanders was looking a little pale, and Hendrix, a lean, flat-cheeked man, showed his teeth in a sympathetic smile. "Don't feel too bad about it, Mark. It could happen to anybody. It was either him or you."

They ought to take up a collection for Mark, Cole thought wryly, or this thing will break his heart.

At this moment, Ray Emerson, the town constable, entered to make his cursory inquest. A slight dyspeptic man, he obviously wanted this job over with as quickly as possible. Sanders told briefly what had happened. "Ray," broke in Annie Jackson. "It was as clear a case of self-defense as I ever want to see."

No one cared to dissent and Emerson, for propriety, picked on Cole at random as an extra witness. "You see it?"

"Yep," said Cole, "I saw it."

"Well?" All eyes were suddenly on Cole.

"When a man gets a gun pulled on him I guess he's got a right to defend himself."

It was a two-way answer, but it immediately satisfied Emerson. "Well, I guess that's that. He was a stranger here; no papers on him. I can tell Johnson to bury him."

Hinges creaked and Jack Benbow shouldered his way in through the front door. The big room was pin-drop still except for the sound of Sanders again shuffling the deck of cards. Benbow was standing, tall and huge inside the door, looking from Cole to Sanders and then to Annie. He seemed

to raise an eyebrow ever so slightly as he looked at the latter two, and Cole, now filled with all kinds of new and sudden thoughts wondered whether Mark or Benbow could be the one who had put that rope on Steven and dragged him.

The quiet was having its effect on Benbow, but he spoke up after a moment to Annie, "Heard you had some trouble here. Too bad. Everything all right now?"

"Somebody tried to pull a fast play on Mark," Annie said. "Oh, well, those things will happen in this business. They can't be helped. It's all over with now."

"That's the way it goes," said Sanders. "I had no hankering to kill anybody. . ." He threw up his hands. ". . . but what are you going to do in a case like that. . .?"

Benbow shrugged and came forward. "A glass of beer, Annie."

To Cole all this sounded peculiarly like a planned and stilted dialogue; not natural; and he had again the instinctive feeling that they had all known that this stranger had to be gotten out of the way, and that they now were watching *him,* Cole. His neck hairs crept.

Sanders kept shuffling and cutting those cards interminably. He addressed the room with a short laugh. "Hope I didn't scare off every player in the room. . . Anybody feel like sitting in a little friendly game?"

There were no immediate takers and Sanders laughed again. "Come, come, gentlemen. . ." He fastened his glance upon Cole. "How about you Cole?"

They were all looking at him again. Annie, Benbow, Mark, Keenan and Hendrix, and he knew the jig was up. Benbow had seen him look at the piece of chalk; Sanders would not forget that thoughtless gun-pull. It were as if he weren't in rags and whiskers at all. They would make some move now; had probably been onto him since the moment he hit town. He grinned as sheepishly as he could and spread his hands. "I reckon not, Mark; thanks just the same. Hell, I might have an ace up my sleeve . . . who can tell?"

As a joke it fell utterly flat. No one even smiled; and presently he decided to walk out of there. He stood for a moment outside, his heart beating wildly. Was this it? He had tossed some bait all right. How soon would they rise to it?

Emerson came out and started down the street. Cole followed. "See you a minute?" He had watched this one for days, could not make up his mind about him. The constable stopped unwillingly and Cole said: "Sure you didn't find any papers on that man?"

"Yes, why?"

"Looked like some kind of a lawman, or marshal to me. . ."

"Be wearing a badge then, wouldn't he?"

Cole shrugged and Emerson, his eyes narrowed, said, "Well, he wasn't. If he was a lawman would he pull a tinhorn trick on Mark? You don't make sense. The heat got you?"

"Hot ain't it," said Cole and walked on.

CHAPTER THREE

He Didn't Come Back

HE TURNED in at Jean Latimer's lunchroom, speculating on his next move. He wanted a cup of black coffee. Jean Latimer was a tall, attractive girl with a tired expression in her large blue eyes. Cole had eaten regularly in the place, which had few customers. He had taken a liking to the girl, a liking which his bad appearance kept from being returned. "I could do with some black coffee," he said.

Sullenly the girl drew his coffee and returned to brooding by the window. Cole said, in his normal voice: "Not much fun waiting on a dirty saddle tramp, is it?"

Taken by surprise she blushed, and he wished he wasn't so unshaven and dirty when he came here. The shadow of a smile flitted across her face. "You said that, not I."

"Well, it's probably true. You got any pie?"

She was looking at him curiously now. "Dried apple, is all."

"It'll do."

Her voice was pleasant and husky, warm when she wanted it to be. While she cut the pie a train went by with a roar and hoot at the end of town, the rattle of it soon losing itself in the distance. The girl stopped and listened, a queer dreamy look on her face.

"Ever take a ride on it?" Cole asked.

"To Grant City and back . . . sure is a big world."

"Lived here all your life?"

She nodded. "Dad had a ranch halfway

to Sundown. I was born there. When he died I drifted in here and opened this place. It's not so long ago."

"Guess there'd be more fun working at Jackson's Emporium," he said.

She gave him a quick look and saw he meant nothing by it. "That's what Annie Jackson told me," she said with tight contempt. "Wouldn't that be the day!"

"Uh huh," he said slowly. "Too much fun; too many people killed."

"Oasis is getting to be quite a place; this is the third trouble like that they've had in the last two months . . . always over some card game. Somebody always seems to be trying to cheat either Mark Sanders or Jack Benbow. I would say that there's something mighty strange about a place like that . . . wouldn't you?"

Cole nodded. "Who killed the two others?"

"That was Benbow."

Cole speared the last of his pie. "And of course nobody ever knew who they were; they never had any means of identification on them."

"How do you know?"

"Guessed it. I was there today. Nice looking fellow. It wasn't very pretty; he was caught cheating. Ended up with a hole through his forehead. Young fellow too... Happened awful quick."

They were silent for a while. Cole had finished the pie and asked for another cup of coffee. Jean Latimer sat with her chin in her hand, looking out on the dusty, sun-scorched street. The minutes ran on. Just as he wished she would talk to him again, she turned her eyes on him, puzzled, a little bit intrigued. "I sometimes wonder, Mr. Cole, what you're trying to hide behind those whiskers . . . why you never shave. You don't seem to be too short of money." She tried an awkward grin. "Naturally it's none of my business. . ."

"Never can tell," he said, pleased. "Maybe I'm a bad man on the dodge."

"No," she said, "You don't look like that."

"Thanks. Sometimes when I shave and spruce up I'd like to come around and call on you," he kidded her, meaning it. She laughed good-naturedly at him. "You might be out of luck."

"Spoken for, of course."

"That could be."

THERE was a warmth in her when she was friendly, which made his day pleasant. His attention was drawn to the street. A small four passenger stage with a double team of frisky bays rolled toward the north end of town. Keenan was on the boot, driving, Sanders sat inside on the backseat. A moment later, Jack Benbow, the train dispatcher, followed the coach on a huge, long-legged buckskin. He was tall and big in the saddle; the buckskin made him look even bigger. It was the first time Cole had seen him ride and his pulses picked up speed.

"Didn't know you had a stage in this town."

"Didn't you know? That's the Sundown Overland," she said. "Benbow runs it. Whenever he's collected enough mail it makes a run and sometimes picks passengers up on the way back."

"No regular schedule?"

"Sometimes it doesn't run for a couple of weeks."

"Hunh . . . nice horses for such a short run, though."

"Jack Benbow likes fast horses. This stage is quite a show with him. He has a beautiful black that he wants to give me."

"I see," said Cole.

"No you don't," she said. "I'm not taking it."

But Cole was almost sweating now. "Have you got a piece of paper; anything will do."

She brought him a sheet of brown paper and watched him with interest as he drew a line across it and marked that, "Railroad." "Look," he said, making a small circle on the railroad. "Now if this line is about a hundred miles long and this is Oasis here, where would Sundown be?"

After a moment she marked a spot. "This is our old ranch, Dad's. Sundown would be about here, above it, and to the left . . . west that would be, is the Hopateh desert."

Cole was marking three towns and stations along the tracks. The desert stretched north of all of them. "No road through that desert at all, is there?"

She did not answer at once and he looked up to see that she was strangely pale. "Queer isn't it?" she said slowly. "Someone else asked me the very same question . . . about six weeks ago. Made a map, too.

Asked about roads in the desert, like you. . ." Her eyes had become distant, and somehow troubled. "He was tall, light-haired . . . nice-looking. It would be funny if you . . . maybe you'd know him. He had a way of throwing his head back when the hair fell in his eye. . ."

She stopped. He said almost brusquely, "Steven was a good-looking kid. He had a little scar here on the left cheek that showed when he laughed. . ." Cole's eyes went almost black; he bit his lip and drummed on the counter with his knuckles. Jean Latimer was staring at him now. "You know him? . . . He went up the road to Sundown . . . he said he would come back . . . what happened to him?"

Cole stood up and folded the crude map. He could not speak. Fear was in the girl's eyes now. "He took me to the dance at the Baptist church," she said softly. "He said he would come back this way for sure. . ."

Cole was tapping the knuckles of one hand into the palm of the other. "He won't take you or anyone else dancing again," he said. "He won't be back this way."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "You mean. . .?"

He was turning toward the door. "Yes. . ."

For a long time they stood looking at each other. At last she said, "God, he was so nice. . . You mean . . . he . . ." She choked, and eventually asked, "It has something to do with Benbow and Annie Jackson, doesn't it. . .? with that man getting killed by Mark Sanders today. . ."

"Smart girl," he said grimly.

"But . . . what goes on? What's it all about?"

"The Topeka Southwestern train robberies."

She said, her voice suddenly gritty and hard, "If there's anything I can do—anything."

"You never can tell," he said with his hand on the doorknob. He was anxious to get out. "You never can tell. Keep your chin up."

A FEW minutes later he was slapping his saddle on the grey at the livery corral across the street. "Anybody come lookin' for me," he told the hostler boy, throwing him two bits, "You tell 'em I went south across the tracks."

In the street he swung toward the depot, cut in through the back alley and headed northward out of town. He let the grey into a sharp lope which gave the animal its best endurance, every ten minutes walking the horse, using it as easily as he could.

Half an hour after he had left Oasis, following the coach tracks on the sandy road, he was aware of being followed. Decisively he pulled his horse to the left of the road and waited for whoever it was to catch up.

In a few minutes Hendrix came riding up with leisurely caution. His horse danced in a circle before he reined it in. "Saw you ridin' " he remarked innocently. "Mind some company?"

Cole kept a right front quarter view of the other, making the grey pivot around its own forefeet by a slight tickle of a rowel. He said, "No, not at all. I'm aheadin' up Sundown way. . ."

"Same here," said Hendrix. "There's a race runnin' I want to make some side bets on." All the while his flat slate-colored eyes watched Cole.

Cole pretended to be at ease and rode on, carefully keeping the other on his right. They rode for quite a while, making small talk, carefully keeping their pace and places till Cole knew they both were fully aware of this jockeying game. He began to think he'd prefer a gun-jumping hand of stud poker.

"You think you'll stick around a while in this part of the country?" Hendrix asked, side-cantering his mount, pretending the beast was unruly.

Cole responded with a compensating maneuver. He said: "That's possible."

It went like that till something went wrong with Hendrix's cinch. He rolled out of the saddle and started fooling with the latigo, while Cole immediately wheeled the grey around to face him. Hendrix then moved so that his own horse was between him and Cole. Cole put his hand on his gun and waited.

Just as the man seemed to be done with his cinch job, Cole swung off the sandy road and Hendrix popped into his saddle once more, to ask puzzled: "Where you headin' now?"

As Cole had thought, Hendrix wanted to get over on his left and had used the cinch business as an excuse. Cole's maneu-

ver however, prevented this. He said, "The road curves. How about taking a short-cut across country."

"There ain't no short-cut," said Hendrix, nervous. "What you talkin'?" He checked his horse and sat still in the saddle. Cole stopped also. The man was sweating now. When their eyes met they knew they were not fooling each other. It was a matter of quick from here on.

Cole's gun barked first, Hendrix's shot went wide and he doubled up in the saddle and gradually slid to the ground. When his horse had quieted, Cole stepped down and walked around behind the other who was lying on his side in the sand. "Where'd I get you?" he asked.

Hendrix groaned. He could not hold his gun; blood showed increasingly on his right chest. There was little Cole could do; it was a low shoulder-wound which had pierced the lung. "Want to talk?" he asked.

Hendrix stared dully at him, his teeth bared a little with the pain. There was hatred in his eyes. "Why should I, you damned snooper," he ejaculated at last with effort.

Cole bent closer. "What do you do with the gold? Which one of you hombres dragged Steven to death at the end of a rope? I mean the young feller with the light hair and the scar on his cheek here. Benbow? Sanders? Which one? Which one?"

Hendrix just stared. A little blood was showing between his teeth; a stubborn smile seemed to crease his hard face. Cole shook his arm. "Tell me," he said frantically. "What can you lose by talking?"

The dying man's mouth opened a little; he coughed. "You . . . go . . . ask Annie." His head sank back and he lay still.

Cole caught Hendrix's horse, rolled the dead man in the unfolded saddle blanket and, laying him in a hollow, covered him with loose earth and stones With a hefty whack on the rump the horse soon galloped away.

HE HAD to catch that coach now, before he lost the tracks in the darkness. Once more he spurred the grey up the road, this time at a long gallop. He wanted to find out what that stage would be doing. One thing he had to keep in mind: Benbow and Sanders would be looking for Hendrix to show up. When they discovered that he had disappeared they would make short work of Cole.

Somewhere along the railroad between Oasis and Santone the express in all likelihood had been stopped and the express car was being robbed. Somewhere in the desert the fleeing robbers would meet up with the stage from Oasis and transfer the loot to it. That was Cole's theory. With a posse supporting him it would be a cinch to try it out. Singlehanded? That was quite another matter.

Others had come here alone, even before Steve McGregor and Haldane, and their bodies were feeding the worms now. Cole shook his head. No sense thinking about that now.

Dark was approaching when a deserted ranch house, outbuildings clustered around it, loomed up ahead. Just before he reached the rickety gate posts, the tracks of the coach veered off the sandy road and ran over a stretch of bunch grass and low sage before he found it again, going west into the desert. He pulled up then and sat for a moment undecided. He checked his rifle. If he followed the coach into the desert and caught up with it, he'd have to shoot and shoot fast on sight. He might catch Sanders and Benbow at the rendezvous and he would have them all. Yet he could not arrest them singlehanded; and he could not shoot without evidence. All he knew was that Hendrix had tried to kill him, that someone on an express car had dropped a piece of chalk through a gunslot.

He was cursing again. He was chasing the wind, that was all.

The grey was dry and he headed back to the road, steering for the deserted ranch. According to where Jean Latimer had spotted her father's former place on his map, this might be it. There might or might not be water in the well.

The place was spooky, crestfallen, in disrepair. Window-panes were shattered, dust was everywhere. The grey threw its head at this desolation and sniffed the air before it quieted down. Cole went to the well and struck a match, saw a faint blurr of his own reflection deep down. A rusty bucket and a tattered rope lay nearby. He laid the rope over the battered pulley and let the bucket down with a squeak and rattle that ran out into the darkness, making a huge

racket in this quiet, increasing the spookiness.

No wonder Jean had left this place.

He had the full bucket with both hands and was lifting it over the well rim when a deep voice behind him said: "Just stand that way, Cole. Keep your hands on that bucket."

"Benbow," said Cole quietly, as his gun was lifted from its holster.

"What happened to Hendrix?"

"Hendrix? Why Hendrix? What do you mean?"

"Quit stalling," said Benbow. "Tell me what happened to Hendrix. . . No, don't turn or I'll let you have it. Tell me what you did with Hendrix. . ."

". . . And then you'll let me have it," mocked Cole. "I sure don't know what you're talking about. I'm a stranger around here. You must have me mixed up with somebody else."

Benbow snarled with impatience. "What do you take me for, man? A fool? I knew you for a snooper the minute I saw you." He made a contemptuous guffaw, "Where did that folksy saddle-tramp voice go that you put on earlier in the day? Now come on, where's Hendrix?"

Cole stiffened and sweated. The surprise had knocked his easy drawl out of him all right. He was a bum actor. There was no talking himself out of this one. But he shrugged. "Couldn't tell you."

"Well, I guess that's good enough for me," Benbow said. "Just back up and keep backing up. . ."

"What for?"

"Just back up across the yard here unless you want it between the shoulder blades. We got a little trick around here that kind of refreshes people's memories when they can't remember. Come on, come on!"

Benbow's voice was cool and conversational. Cole heard his retreating footsteps in the sand. "Put that bucket down and back up. Follow my voice."

The grey was already nuzzling at the bucket and as Cole bent over, setting it down, there was a desperate moment when he had to fight off the desire to make a dive under the horse and take his chance. But Benbow might kill the horse. . .

So he backed up across the yard, toward the house, till there was a sudden stir of hoofs behind him and Benbow's voice came from saddle height. "All right, stand still."

Suddenly there was a small whirr and a hard loop of rope slapped down over his head, tightening in an instant and nailing his elbows to his sides. He began to squirm and shake it off, but the crash of Benbow's revolver and a spatter of gravel on his boots made him think better of it. He stood still, feeling the rope tight as a bowstring.

"Now," said Benbow. "Tell me where Hendrix is and whether you're alone in this. Anybody with you? Anybody know you're at Oasis?"

"I should tell you?" grunted Cole.

"We might make a deal," said Benbow. "A few hundred yards on the end of this rope won't do you any good. And the rope is tied."

"Hombres like you," said Cole, "Don't make deals."

"You're too smart for your own good. Do I have to give you a little sample before you talk?" Benbow, backed his horse up and jerked Cole backwards a few steps so that he stumbled.

"Just tell me one thing," said Cole. "Were you the one who dragged Steven McGregor, a young blond feller. . ."

Benbow's only answer was to wheel his horse, dig in the spurs so the animal roared with pain. It shout out through the yard, heading straight for the rough ground.

Cole managed the first few yards by jumps, then he went down, rolled, dragged, turned over a couple of times, by a miracle he got up again as Benbow's horse cleared an obstacle. By the time he had gone fifty yards, the knife he had been drawing from his waistband, and which he had kept there for just such a chance as this, reached the rope and snapped it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death for the Killer

HE SAT up, numb of shoulders, and shook his bruised head. Blood ran down over his face. But in an instant he was up and free of the rope-end, running zig zag back toward the ranch.

Benbow was trying to pot him from the saddle, but had no luck. His shots went wide. It was almost dark now. Cole began whistling and calling for the grey. The grey ran toward him after a moment, but

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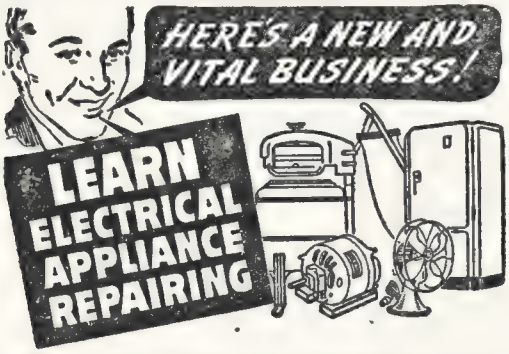

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by that time Benbow came streaking toward him too and he had to dodge into the dark behind a clump of sage.

The grey however, would have none of Benbow, being trained to avoid strangers unless ordered by Cole to obey them. It circled the yard and then stood still at a distance. Benbow attempted a run to catch it; but the horse turned tail and galloped toward the dark north of the ranch. Cole's heart stood still then as he saw the man dismount and pull his rifle from its boot. While the grey was still faintly visible Benbow calmly pumped two bullets into the horse.

The animal went end over end with a scream and lay still with a final flutter and clacking of hoofs.

In the few seconds it had taken Benbow to dismount, aim and fire, Cole had made the short dash from his spot to the corner of the first outbuilding, a woodshed, near the ranch house. From there he saw Benbow wheel, rifle at ready and march across the yard and to the spot where he had seen Cole duck. He stopped at twenty yards and fired two rifle shots into the bush and waited. Then he fired again and moved forward.

Cole was running; past the back of the house, north, his heart pumping, his lungs heaving. Rage gave him wings.

He saw it, under the blanket of darkness, now closing down faster and faster, the inert grey mass on the ground; the rifle was half out of the scabbard. He had it, wheeled, half ran half walked back toward the yard.

Benbow was standing in bewildered frenzy out in the sage, his pistol poised, his rifle in his left hand. He was cursing and cranning his neck. He wheeled sharply as he heard Close cross the gravelly yard, calling him. The pistol swung up as Cole calmly laid the rifle to cheek and fired once, twice.

He circled carefully and came up behind Benbow who was lying against a sageclump, still holding his pistol. He kicked the weapon out of his hand and struck a match. Benbow's eyelids fluttered.

Cole squatted down in front of him. "How about you talking a little. Where do you hide the money? Where does it go?"

Benbow opened his mouth wide and

sucked for breath. "You son of . . ." He gurgled incoherently. Suddenly he said, "Go ask Annie. Ask An . . ." The rest of the words drowned in another rattling gurgle, a choking; then the man was suddenly very still. There was no pulse.

Cole went back to the yard and caught Benbow's horse and tied it. He went with heavy steps to retrieve his own saddle and transfer it. Mounting he rode over to where Benbow lay, snaked a loop around the dead man's feet and dragged the body out of sight behind the grass-grown ruins of a bunkhouse on the far side of the ranch.

He stood in the darkness, a bitter and dejected man; his anger had boiled out of him. He prodded Benbow's corpse with his boot. "You weren't worth a good horse, you skunk," he murmured. "None of your ilk is. You hombres play for keeps . . . well, I play for keeps too."

He was reloading his rifle when he heard the rattle and clang of the coach in the far distance. Walking the horse out behind the farthest corral he tied it there, lashed a kerchief around its muzzle to keep it quiet, and walked back to the ranch house. He reached the rear of the house as the coach swung into the yard and stopped.

A voice that Cole knew was Keenan's called: "Benbow! Benbow!"

Sanders voice rose from a murmur of several voices inside the coach, "What the hell! Where is he? Where's Hendrix? Hendrix was supposed to meet him here after he fixed that saddle tramp. . ."

Keenan cracked the whip a couple of times and called again. "Maybe they went back to Oasis."

"That wasn't the agreement. They were to wait here. Something must have gone wrong."

"Everything's going wrong today," growled a voice from the inside of the coach. "Dammit to hell, I never saw so many deputies on a train. My arm. . ."

"Your arm nothing," said a third voice. "You got away, didn't you. Johnson and Luke didn't. . ."

That made a small silence. Then someone suggested, "If something has gone wrong it might be better to head for Sundown. We can pick up horses there. . ."

Sanders ejaculated an oath. "We'll head for Oasis. They can't have that covered

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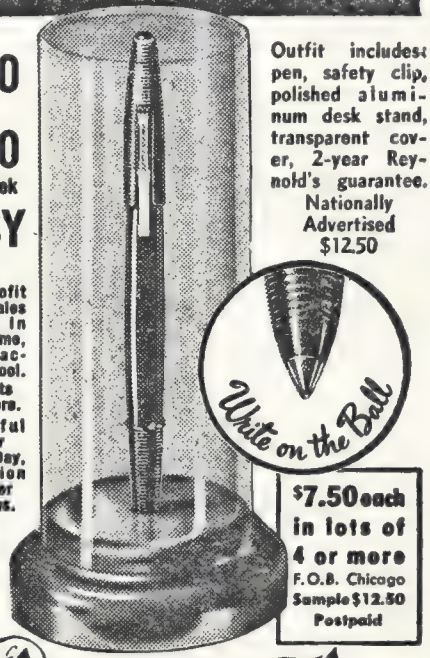

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yet . . . we have to find out about Benbow and Hendrix and that saddle tramp, Cole. We have a jackpot to split. Which will it be, gentlemen, Sundown or Oasis?"

After a quick confab, Oasis was decided upon. Cole had removed his boots and had seen his chance to sneak from the corner of the house while Keenan was watering the horses, and stand hidden under the rear boot, covered by the dark.

Poking his hand through the spokes of the right rear wheel he worked frantically on the cotter pin with his knife. Just as he thought he'd be too late he got it flattened and jerked it out with a jump that skinned his knuckles. The nut, well greased, spun easily on the shaft. After a moment it thudded into the dust.

Keenan was on the seat again and swung the teams out of the yard. Cole raced for his boots and streaked for the horse behind the bunk house. He unwrapped the kerchief from its muzzle, and mounted, riding a wide circle through a dried-out pasture before he began veering toward the road.

The coach got a quarter mile along the road, keeping the wheel on through virtue of the right hand turn it made out of the yard. But then he heard it; the crash and roar, the yell from the men as the tall vehicle turned over in the dark. It was traveling as fast as Keenan could push the horses and if Cole was lucky that wheel would keep rolling some distance in the dark. They would have a hell of a time finding it.

JEAN LATIMER was closing her lunchroom for the night when Cole crossed Oasis' main street from the back alley and quietly knocked on her door. Swiftly she unlocked it and let him in. Five minutes later she said, pale and shaken. "Of course I'll do it, but can you depend on Ray Emerson? He came in here after you'd gone and asked me a lot of questions about you. There's no telling what side of the fence he's on."

Cole said, "We'll have to take that chance. Tell him he'll make the catch of a lifetime . . . there'll be a reward."

She went over to a drawer in the counter and brought out a small revolver which she tucked into her blouse. "I don't trust that man," she said.

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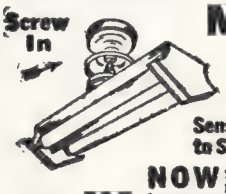

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"Look," he said sharply, "You won't need that gun. I want you to keep out of the way after you have given him my message. Tell him to bring a deputy. When you've seen him, go to the depot, break in if you have to, and send this message on the telegraph. Don't worry about an answer. . ." He was making a series of dots and dashes in pencil on a piece of paper, and drawing a quick sketch of the key and switch. "Flip this switch here first . . . doesn't matter if you send slowly . . . it's easy. When you hear it clicking back at you, you know you've got through. Just keep repeating till you hear."

He moved toward the door. "Haven't got a second to waste. Luck to you, Jean."

Her eyes were steady on him, but her voice was nervous. "Luck to you, Cole. Be careful." Then he was gone.

Jackson's Emporium was crowded. Beer and liquor was flowing, talk was buzzing. News had come down along the rail line that another hold-up had been attempted fifty miles west of Oasis; two of the bandits had been killed; three had got away. The usual trick of blowing a hole in the floor of the express car with a small stick of dynamite had not got a chance to work before half a dozen armed deputies had opened fire.

Annie was pacing nervously back and forth at the end of the bar, smoking a cigarette, listening to fragments of the talk that floated through the big smoke-filled room. There was a glass on the bar near her.

She did not see Cole till he was close to her, then she caught her breath, recovered, smiled, but the two rouge spots on her cheeks stood out sharply on the almost white background of her cheeks.

"Hello, handsome, back so soon?"

Her eyes said frantically: What happened to Hendrix? What happened to Mark? Cole grinned, "Got lonesome for you, sweetheart. I almost shaved for you. . ."

She was unable to join the spirit of his kidding and tried to catch the eye of Sam Timmons, but the tender had left the bar for a moment. Cole stepped close to her and said, grave and urgent, "Could I see

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you in your office for a moment, Annie? I want to talk to you."

Her glance searched his face in desperation, then she said: "Why not? Want a drink first?"

"Never mind," he said.

SHE led him into a small corridor beyond a door at the end of the bar. In the middle of the corridor was a door leading to her office. He closed the door behind him but could find no key to turn. There was a large table in the middle, a sofa with pillows, a desk and several chairs; gaudy theatrical pictures hung on the walls. He suddenly realized that the room had no windows.

Annie had turned to face him, the smile gone. "Well, what is it? What's on your mind?"

"You know I kind of like you," he said. "I want to see you step out of this mess before it's too late. . ."

"Cut the chatter," she said sharply. "What are you talking about, Cole? Make sense."

Cole shook his head slowly. "No use bluffing, Annie. I saw you take the badge off that dead marshal this afternoon. The game is up. Why make any flutter about it? I can make it easy for you if you put your finger on the train loot and step out of the picture. I can keep my mouth shut."

She sank down on the sofa and for a moment buried her face in her hands. He could not tell whether she was crying or thinking. "Come on, Annie," he said. "What do you say?"

She was sitting sideways on the sofa. One hand held her handkerchief to her face, the other sank listlessly down. Cole was upset. He had little experience in this kind of a situation with a woman. "This is what I say," she ejaculated suddenly.

There was a flutter of movement; the sofa pillows dropped away from the sawed-off sixteen gauge shotgun that her hand had picked up from under them. The twin barrels swung toward him as the hammers clicked back. "Keep them up, Honeyboy. Buckshot in both of them. Sit pretty on that chair unless you want to swallow some."

"Cool, aren't you, sweetheart," she said acidly. "Suppose you talk a little, and talk

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fast. I want the truth. Where are the others? Don't try to lie. Who's here in town with you? I can tell by your manner when you lie so don't try to fool me, or I'll let you have both of these." She jiggled the gun.

"It's like I said," he told her slowly. "I got the others corralled. I got a couple of men here in town. . . They're waiting on the other side of the street; they don't know I'm in here. You make a racket with that barker and they'll come running. Be smart, Annie. Step out of this while you still have the chance."

CHAPTER FIVE

End of the Trail

THERE was a sudden tramping of many feet, a slamming of the door at the back of the building. Annie got tense. In a moment Sanders, Keenan and three strange men burst into the office.

They grasped the situation in silence. Then Sanders said, "Well, Cole, sitting in

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a little game?" Annie said grittily, "You dirty liar. I told you you were lying. . ." She jerked the shotgun forward in anger. Cole made ready to dive for it.

Sanders said, "Hold on, Annie. Take it easy . . . no noise. We got to do this quiet."

Keenan said: "What'll we do with him?"

In answer Annie tapped her heel on the floor. It sounded hollow. "Down there," she said. "No one will find him. Not for a while anyhow." She addressed Sanders, "We're clearing out then?"

He nodded grimly, "Yes, Annie. This is it. We'll split that jackpot right now. You hold the barker on him while I get ready." He bent down and pulled a small rug from the floor, revealing a hatch. Keenan stepped toward Cole to lift his gun.

"Wait a minute; wait a minute!" Cole shouted. "Come another step and I'll take my chance and go for my hogleg. Like you say, Mark. Better do this quiet. I got men outside."

"He's lying," said Annie. "Handsome, you're the smoothest liar I ever seen; but you won't be lyin' much longer."

Keenan had stopped and Cole knew that now he'd have to chance it and dive for it. Now or never! There were five of them—six with Annie. He had six shots in his gun. . . .

Keenan said, "Sure we'll do it quiet," and grabbed a pillow from the sofa, ramming the muzzle of his pistol into it, holding the pillow around the weapon as he pointed it at Cole. "No noise now. . ."

Now! thought Cole. . .

There were two sharp raps on the door, and Sanders immediately called, "Who's there?"

"It's Ray," said Emerson's voice outside. "Open the door. I've got to see you." He sounded worried.

Sanders laid a hand on the doorknob. "Wait a moment," said Keenan and moved between Annie and the door. "We don't want him to see the barker. . ." He kicked the rug back across the hatch.

Mark then released the latch and the door swung open. Cole saw Ray Emerson in the doorway, taut and nervous, a heavy pistol in each hand leveled at those opposite him in the room. "Reach!" he demanded in an odd, almost unsteady voice.

"Put that barker down, Annie," said Cole quickly in a low tone. "You'll be better off. Maybe I'll forget about it in the courtroom . . . "

She cursed him then. "Oh, shut up! I should have let you have them barrels when I first had a mind."

"Now, now," he admonished her. "You better save that kind of talk for the courtroom."

Shrewd, she fell silent then. Ray Emerson was still in the doorway, holding his pistols on the men. It was not till Cole walked over to him that he discovered the reason for the constable's odd manner and pale and shaking appearance. Behind him and out of sight in the corridor outside stood Jean Latimer, the pistol that Cole had seen her pack into her blouse, rammed tight against Emerson's ribs.

"I'm the deputy," she said, her eyes shining at him as the first of the curious crowd began moving into the corridor from the saloon.

Later, when Annie and her friends were safely in the town's jail, guarded by a Ray Emerson suddenly filled with civic virtue, Cole and Jean Latimer listened to the clicking of the telegraph at the depot.

Jean had sunk into Jack Benbow's swivel chair; she looked tired and worn, except for her eyes. They had a new sparkle in them as she looked up at Cole.

"One more thing I want to do," he said and ran a hand over his jaws. He was trying to smile.

"What, Cole?"

"I want to get a razor and shave," he said and kept looking at her.

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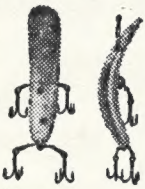

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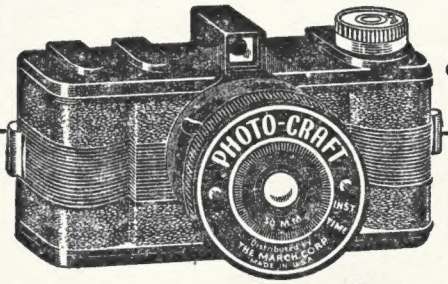

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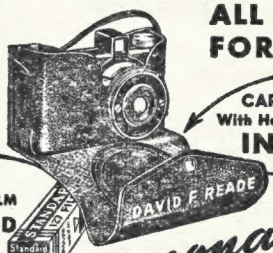

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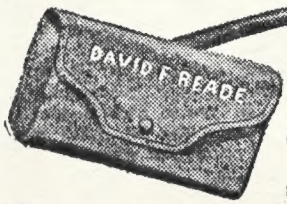

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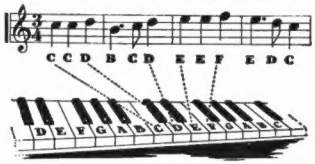

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